

Robin Thibault's story

2004 - Psychological operations at Multi National Task Force – North West Headquarters



Signs of ethnic cleansing in an area near the HQ
Photo provided by Robin Thibault

Authors' note

The principal authors of this text, aside from the individual recounting the story, are John Cochrane, a former member of the unit, and his niece Marina Tinkler, a Concordia University literature student. This record of events was prepared in 2015, many years after they occurred. The authors prepared this record principally using information obtained during interviews with the individuals involved. Where possible, this information was corroborated through interviews with others and a review of pictures and other publicly available information. The record presents the events as the individuals involved remember them several years after they occurred.

Robin Thibault's story

Background

From March to September 2004 Lieutenant Robin Thibault served as the Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) operations officer at the headquarters of NATO's Multi National Task Force North-West (MNTF-NW) in Banja Luka, Bosnia. During his time in Bosnia, he received his promotion to Captain.

In Bosnia, PSYOPS¹ were aimed at disseminating information to facilitate the work of the military by impacting the attitudes of the local civilian population.

Preparation

In the spring of 2003, Robin was a troop leader at the RCH. During the summer, he was acting as a course officer running a driver course at Canadian Forces Base Valcartier. He was very interested in obtaining an overseas posting and had applied unsuccessfully for a number of positions. A call was then issued for candidates for PSYOPS in Bosnia. He applied immediately, was accepted and left the driver course to start his pre-deployment training.

For his pre-deployment training, Robin was attached to the *Secteur du Québec de la Force Terrestre* Intelligence Section (SQFT G9) in Camp Valcartier. The section did not have any pre-established training program for a PSYOPS role because of its unique nature, so the person in charge improvised a series of diverse courses and other training activities for Robin. Most of the courses and activities he attended were focused on preparing other members of a battle group from the *5e Groupe-brigade mécanisé du Canada* for deployment to Afghanistan.

In the summer, Robin was sent on a course at the Pearson peacekeeping college in St-Jean with some Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) operators. In the fall, he was assigned to help the G9 section organise some tactical exercises without troops (TEWT's) that were being run to train the officers of the brigade group. TEWT's are training activities that give practice to officers by presenting them with a series of problems or tactical situations and asking them to prepare their assessments, plan their tactics and issue their orders. These activities are typically performed by officers while the NCO's prepare the troops and move them forward to receive the orders and commence an operation. After the TEWT's, he participated in a large exercise at Fort Drum in northern New York State aimed principally at validating that the Battle Group was ready for deployment. During that exercise, he was asked to play various roles including that of the National Police department director, to help the troops practice their liaison and coordination skills.

Robin participated in further training activities with a Mentoring Observation Stabilisation Team (MOST) of about 40 individuals. He was then sent on a 2-week long PSYOPS course in Chicksands², just north of London, England.

Upon his return from London, he rejoined the MOST group and moved with it to the Peace Support Training Centre in Kingston to take a UN observer-style course. The course was aimed at training both police and military personnel. Robin was impressed with the professionalism of the training. As a training aid, the facility had set up a village like those found in Bosnia with booby traps in the houses.

Deployment to Bosnia



In March, Robin was deployed to Bosnia with a Canadian contingent. The contingent flew to Zagreb, Croatia from Trenton, Ontario, in a military passenger plane and then travelled by bus to camp Black Bear in Velika Kladusa (VK). Camp Black Bear was the logistical and administrative headquarters for the Canadian Forces in Bosnia. Then he travelled to Banja Luka where the headquarters of the Multi-National Task Force North-West was situated in an abandoned metal factory.

During the first week of his deployment, he attended local familiarisation training run by the task force for new arrivals at the Hotel San in Laktasi. It consisted of a week of various briefings, presentations and meetings. At these presentations, Robin remembers hearing that the opposing parties were no longer in direct conflict, and that the key risks were the presence of unmarked minefields and booby-traps, the presence of criminal organisations involved in smuggling and other illicit activities, and the widespread availability of weapons that the local population had stashed for use in case the hostilities recommenced.

He remembers an incident on the first night at the hotel that helped him better understand the local situation. It started when he heard a car screeching its tires in the parking lot followed by a local person shouting something that sounded like insults or threats at the occupants of the hotel. He remembered feeling somewhat vulnerable given that he and the other hotel guests had checked in their fire arms at the front desk when they entered the hotel. In his pyjamas, Robin ran down to the lobby and informed the Dutch security team responsible for local protection. By the time the security team ran outside to see what was happening the irate individual had disappeared. This was an example of how some of the local residents often expressed their animosity to the NATO forces. Certain Serbs in the area around the hotel seemed to resent the presence of the NATO troops.

PSYOPS team structure

The headquarters oversaw NATO's operations in what was often referred to as the Northwest or the UK sector of Bosnia. The headquarters oversaw troops principally from the UK, the Netherlands and Canada. Its area of responsibility was equal to roughly one third of the country – the northwest corner. This area encompassed sections of the country that had either been designated as Serb or Muslim and Croat. During Robin's period of employment at the headquarters, it was commanded by a Canadian, Brigadier General Stuart Beare.

	
<p><i>A picture of the metal factory showing the helipad and some of the buildings in the background. An armoured vehicle from Mike Bisson's troop is seen deployed on the tarmac in reaction to an intelligence report that insurgents were planning an attack on the headquarters</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>	<p><i>View of town adjacent to the metal factory</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>

At the headquarters, the PSYOPS team was part of the Information operations group (INFO OPS), which was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel David Broadfoot, a British officer and the Information operations chief for the task force. The INFO OPS group also included two other sub-groups: media operations and public affairs.

The PSYOPS team itself included the following sections:

- A document production section that produced printed material and visual art
- A web design team
- A magazine section that published the *Mostovi* magazine
- An FM radio station; and
- A tactical PSYOP section, that conducted field surveys or performed other duties as required.

It was staffed by 8 NATO personnel and 15 to 20 local employees. Its offices were situated in the yard of the metal factory near the NW task force's HQ.

Robin was operations officer for the PSYOPS team initially under the command of Major David McBirnie, head of the PSYOPS operation for the NW task force. Part way through the tour, Major McBirnie was replaced by Major Kirsty McQuade, who took it upon herself to teach Robin a lot more about PSYOPS. Every morning Robin would accompany his superior to the General's morning briefing and take notes from the back of the room. At these meetings, his superior would often report on the status or progress of PSYOPS. Robin was often called upon to help prepare the briefing materials. At these meetings, much information was passed so Robin was well informed about current operations.

The PSYOPS team had 10 priority messages that they tried to promote in their communications to the local population. Notably, the team tried to promote peace & tolerance, to encourage people to surrender weapons, to stop or report illegal logging, and to favour a secure environment. The messages were directed principally to the younger population who might not be so set in their ways.

When Robin arrived, the team and the facility were already well established and running smoothly. The fact that they were running smoothly gave Robin more time to work on special projects and to get out and see some of the surrounding country side. He regularly had to travel to the higher headquarters, located at Camp Butmir near Sarajevo, to liaise and get instructions from the SFOR Chief PSYOPS group that coordinated the PSYOPS strategy for the entire country.



*Robin with some of the people he worked with in Bosnia. From left to right: Kirsty McQuade, the PSYOPS commander at the MNTF-NW headquarters, the PSYOPS interpreter, the local police commander, a British soldier assigned to security at the headquarters, a local policeman and Robin Thibault.
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*



*At the Banja Luka Metal Factory, Robin shared accommodations with an Italian Carabinieri who was attached to the Headquarters as a liaison officer. From left to right : Alfred, Robin and Paulo. Picture taken at the Carabinieri Camp in Camp Butmir.
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Typical activities of each of the PSYOPS sections

The document production section was employed principally in preparing signs and posters that were used to support military objectives. It was managed by a Dutch officer and staffed with one or more graphic illustrators. They would design the content of the documents and send them to be printed at a local print shop. The posters or pamphlets would then be distributed to the troops for dissemination. An example of the posters that they would prepare was a poster that announced an upcoming weapons collection operation. There was a blank space in the middle of these posters where the area being covered and the dates of the operation could be written. With the help of the local police, these posters would be placed at stores, bus stops and other locations approximately two weeks ahead of an operation with a view to avoiding surprises when the troops arrived to collect weapons.





The web design team was responsible to maintain an information site for the task force and provide information to the citizens. It was operated by a Dutch Warrant Officer and a team of local civilians. It was mainly an information site that reinforced the same messages as the other departments. At that time, web traffic was very low, as the use of the internet had not really developed and few of the locals had computers.

The magazine section published a monthly magazine, called the *Mostovi*, which meant “bridges”. A Canadian officer was the chief editor but all the articles were written by a team of four local journalists in their own language. The magazine was the only magazine available in Bosnia and Herzegovina that used both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. The magazine had on average 12 pages per issue and many pictures. Pictures were used notably in an effort to get people to read articles prepared using one alphabet or the other. The age of the target audience ranged between 15 and 35 years. The content was aimed at providing its readers with an unbiased view of events. It included many entertainment features and educational articles. It also had articles about SFOR activities or articles promoting tolerance or peace but those articles never took up more than two of the twelve pages. During Robin’s tour, the magazine staff also starting including articles promoting local individuals who were making

positive changes within their communities. Pictures, text and illustrations from a variety of sources were assembled by the magazine team.

Sometimes the magazine would work with the radio station on a joint campaign, for example to sensitize the population to the problems of displaced people and refugees. The magazine had a circulation of over 30,000 copies. Originally, the magazine was distributed to the local population by the NATO soldiers located in the different camps within the sector. As the number of soldiers had been drastically reduced and many of those camps had been closed just before Robin's arrival in preparation for the planned termination of NATO's involvement in the region, this method of distribution became impractical. A Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman who was in the area mentoring local policemen offered an alternative solution by proposing that the magazine be distributed by the local police. He thought that this could help the local police establish the same link with the community that the NATO task force had been trying to establish. After reflecting on the offer, Robin agreed to pursue this approach, given that the task force was in a transitional phase trying to strengthen the local authorities.

	
<p><i>On left - Printed version of the MOSTOVI Magazine after they were received from the outside print shop</i> <i>On right – printed version of MIRKO magazine produced by the SFOR PSYOPS group and aimed at even younger children</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>	<p><i>Meeting of magazine and production staff proposing documents for publication</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>

The radio station, called Oksigen FM, strove to build a wide audience among the young adult population. It played modern music targeting that population and occasionally broadcast messages that would promote peace and tolerance. The station was managed by a flamboyant former British Captain, David Baily, MBE. It operated solely in the local language using local DJ's and producers. Occasionally it would pass on public service messages or participate in a coordinated campaign relating to one of the task force's activities or priorities.

	
	
<p><i>Night-time concerts organised by Oksigen FM</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>	<p><i>DJ at music festival organised by the task force's radio station. Young people were encouraged to bring their tents and spend the night</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>

In the summertime, the radio station organised a number of events at which young people were invited to camp out and listen to music played by DJ's brought in from the UK, or by the station's own DJ's. Robin remembers attending several of these events to see how things were going and to enjoy the music and the sunshine. Before leaving the camp, however, he was warned by the station manager not to attend in uniform because the young people were not likely to be as accepting of the radio station and its messages if they were clearly reminded that it was being run by the military.



*Local radio announcers at Radio Oksigen broadcasting at a music festival they organised
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*



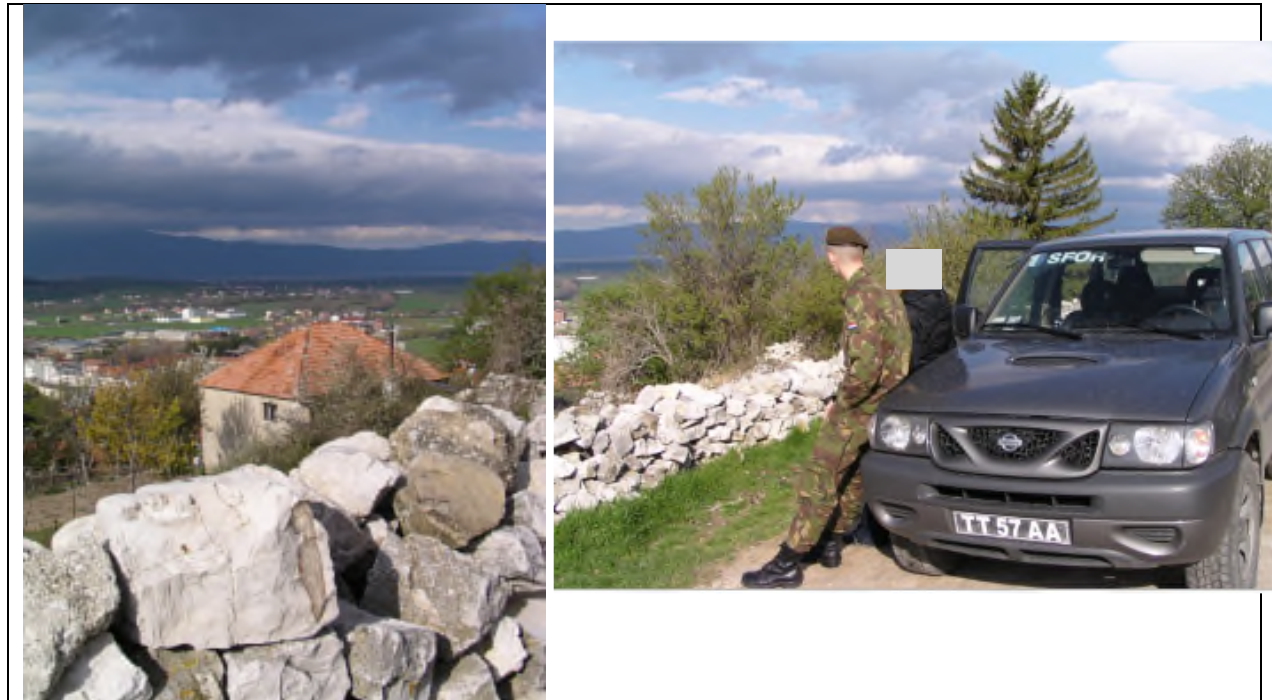
*David Bailey, the radio station manager and former army captain from the UK
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Initially, the PSYOPS team did not have a tactical section, so Robin was tasked to supervise the creation and operation of such a team. The tactical section would go out into a specified area to collect information necessary for the planning process. Initially, since all the other operations were running smoothly and since he wanted to acclimatize himself to the country, Robin undertook some of these missions himself. Eventually, he assigned others to the task, and requested the assistance of the US PSYOPS team to help him train the MNTF-NW team.

Tactical PSYOPS logging survey

Early during his tour, Robin was asked to visit the town of Livno to perform a survey regarding illegal logging. The town of Livno was situated high in the mountains in the south-western part of the Dutch sector near the border with Croatia. An assessment of the situation was requested by the task force commander who was wondering if it was still necessary to have his troops organise roadblocks with a view to preventing illegal logging. Up until that time, SFOR troops would set up checkpoints with the local police so that the latter could check the drivers' papers and ensure that the logging taxes had been paid on the logs they were carrying. The regional government had a stamping system for each log harvested but some truckers were inclined to avoid buying the required stamps. This practice was of concern to NATO, because the local governments that NATO was trying to foster would not have sufficient funds to operate if its citizens were not paying their taxes.

To conduct the survey, Robin travelled in a single vehicle with his Dutch military driver, private Croun, and a civilian interpreter. On the road to Livno, he saw many houses that had been destroyed or damaged during the war. He wondered more than once if they had been victims of ethnic cleansing battles. When he arrived at Livno, he noted that the road sign that welcomes travellers to the town had been marked with numerous bullet holes. In Livno, Robin met with representatives of the local government and the European police. One of the people he met felt that the local police were not doing their job. Another person he met was reluctant to explain everything because she had already briefed soldiers from previous rotations who did not seem to have passed on the information when they left.



*Robin's Dutch driver Private Croun and interpreter take a roadside rest stop near Livno during the information gathering mission regarding illegal logging
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

After meeting with the local authorities, Robin noted that the countryside in the immediate vicinity of Livno was comprised of high rocky hills that were generally devoid of trees. Since illegal logging could not be a problem in an area that was devoid of trees, he decided to move his survey further north to the town of Drvar. In that area he found lush farming valleys surrounded by hills covered by dense forests. With the help of his interpreter, he performed a non-scientific survey of approximately 10 families in the valley using five basic questions. Curiously, he found that the families on one side of the valley were very worried about illegal logging and the families on the other did not seem to be bothered at all. Overall, however, the families were welcoming, helpful and generally concerned about the situation and the impact that the logging activity had on the environment. When he returned to the Headquarters he reported that both the authorities and people were concerned with illegal logging and he proposed that the task force continue targeting potential illegal logging. It had been a multi-day trip and the three of them had stayed in local hotels and eaten in local restaurants. Robin had carried sufficient cash to pay for the rooms, gas and meals for the three of them.

	
<p><i>Magnificent view of the countryside taken during a flight to higher headquarters</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>	<p><i>Destroyed building in Mostar that apparently contained numerous booby traps</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>

This survey was Robin's first experience working with an interpreter, and over several days, he developed a very high opinion of her ability to communicate with people and get them to open up. This had also been her first assignment SFOR. The interpreter was the product of a mixed marriage, so her parents were mistrusted by both ethnic communities. When the war broke out, they had been visiting their cottage near Laktasi and were stranded there until the end of the hostilities. Subsequent to the logging survey, the local agency, which provided the interpreters for the task force, tried to substitute another interpreter in her place, a move that Robin resisted because he now felt confident about her abilities and trusted her. Robin also suspected that the manager of the agency was trying to give preferential treatment to one of her friends. Robin's superior must have felt the pressure because he came and met with Robin to try to get him to change his mind. Robin insisted that she not be replaced as she had proved herself to be a trustworthy and competent co-worker.

For the remainder of the rotation, that interpreter was employed by the tactical PSYOPS team that was surveying the local community before and after NATO operations. She also acted as Robin's interpreter whenever he left the compound. At end of tour, she thanked Robin for his support by giving him a gift comprised of a homemade wooden box that contained two bottles of wine, one representing each community. The mixture of wines was symbolic of her own history. It was a token of thanks for the fact that Robin's loyalty had enabled her to support her family through very difficult economic times. Robin

recognized the importance of the gift, given the sacrifice that she no doubt made to assemble it. Consequently, Robin thanked her and promised that he would keep them for a really special occasion, and indeed at the time of this interview he had not yet opened them.

Tactical PSYOPS exchange with the Americans and a visit to Srebrenica

On another occasion, Robin and the members of his tactical PSYOPS team travelled to Tuzla in the US sector of Bosnia for an exchange meeting with the American tactical PSYOPS team. This particular visit was organised by Robin principally so that the American Tactical PSYOPS team could explain their approach, techniques and procedures to Robin and his newly formed tactical PSYOP team.



A visit with the US PSYOPS team in the American Sector to learn more about the operations of their tactical PSYOPS team.

Photo provided by Robin Thibault



American Tactical PSYOPS leader (Sergeant at right) with his interpreter at left giving out soccer balls to the children at the Srebrenica orphanage

Photo provided by Robin Thibault

During that mission Robin asked if it would also be possible for the Americans to organise a visit for the team to the town of Srebrenica, the site of a widely-reported massacre in 1995. The American team responded by organising an official PSYOPS visit to a nearby orphanage, following a route that passed through the town.

The massacre occurred in 1995 when peacekeeping activities were under the command of the United Nations. At that time, the town was a Bosniak enclave surrounded by Bosnian Serb Communities. The UN had declared the enclave to be a safe area and had initially deployed a company from the *Royal 22e Régiment* there to observe the peace. In 1994, the Canadians had been replaced by a Dutch Battalion and in 1995, the hostilities between the opposing parties intensified and the Bosnian Serb Army launched an operation with the intent of taking control of the town.

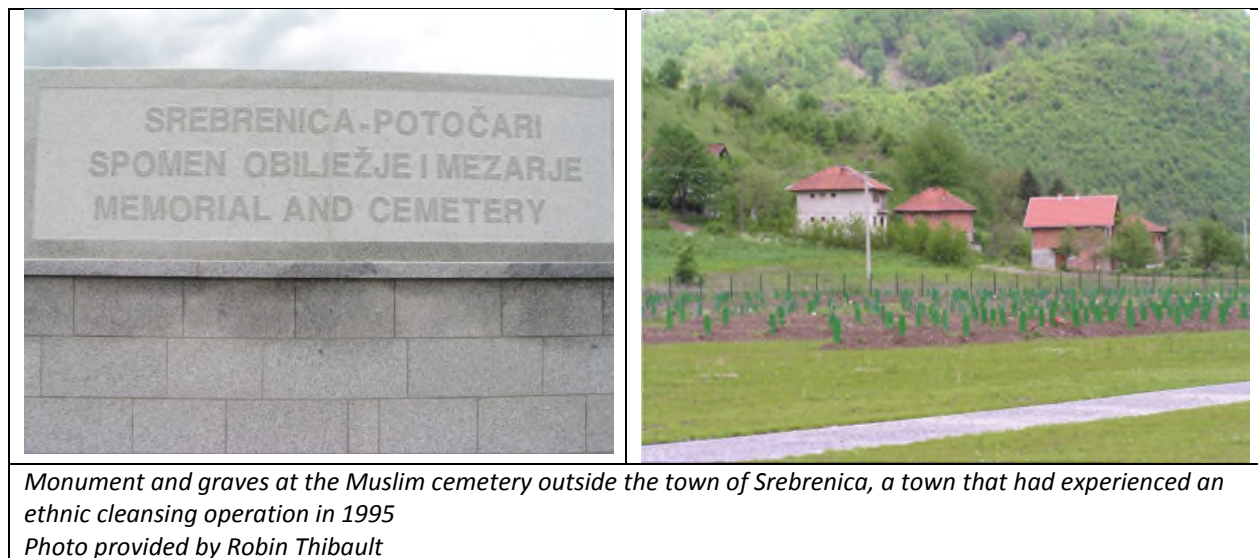
Representatives of the Dutch Battalion helped the opposing parties negotiate an arrangement whereby the 30,000 or so Bosniak residents of the city were to be evacuated by bus to Tuzla or other Bosniak communities further west. When the busses were loaded, the Bosnian Serb Army made sure that the men embarked on separate busses from those carrying the women and children. As the busses passed

through nearby Serb dominated towns, those carrying the males were detoured and taken to killing grounds where approximately 1,700 men were killed. Many of the Muslim men that had been present in the town had not boarded the busses, either because they were combatants or because they did not trust the Serbs. They preferred to try and infiltrate through the forests. Many of these men were hunted down and killed after the evacuation. After the war, the incident was investigated by the United Nations and declared to be a massacre. Further, the UN sponsored a project to exhume the bodies from the mass graves, identify each individual and bury them in a proper Muslim cemetery. In all, over 6,000 Bosniak male bodies had been recovered to the cemetery.

In the surrounding communities, many Serbs also died when ethnic cleansing activities had been carried out earlier by the Bosniak combatants.

Robin wanted to visit the site since it had been a frequent topic of discussion in Canadian messes. Upon hearing the news of the massacre, many of the Canadians who served in Srebrenica or in support of the Canadians stationed there expressed their frustration regarding the futility of their efforts aimed at avoiding just such an event.

On the day of his visit the weather was sombre, cloudy and overcast. Robin visited the cenotaph and the site of the hillside cemetery.



Robin remembers seeing that the village was now inhabited by new residents who did not at all seem friendly. They merely stared at Robin and the soldiers that were with him with an untrusting look.



*A visit to the town of Srebrenica, a formerly-Muslim enclave that had experienced an ethnic cleansing operation in 1995. Local residents were wary of the visitors
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Weapons collections and destructions

Several times during the tour, the PSYOPS team was asked to support the weapons harvesting operations. Typically, they would prepare and distribute announcements indicating that an operation was about to begin. The troops would then move in and conduct the search and the tactical PSYOPS team would follow to collect information. Sometimes, the military police would set up observation or control points between the time that the operation was announced and the time the operation started in an attempt to observe people who might be attempting to move or hide weapons.

On one occasion, Robin was asked to escort a CBC Radio reporter to visit the troops in the field and take him to see a weapons clearing operation. He remembers taking the reporter to the Prnjavor area where the 12 RBC recce squadron was performing just such an operation.

Later on during the tour, Robin travelled with the public affairs team to witness a mass destruction of weapons at a foundry in one of the Bosniak cantons to the south. The representatives of the headquarters set out in a convoy of three vehicles, attended the ceremony, and returned to the camp later in the evening. The destruction was carried out by soldiers from the Army of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the half of the country occupied by Bosniaks and Croats). It was conducted in a very public way and a lot of pictures were taken with a view to publishing them in a related article in the Mostovi magazine. The destruction was carried out by local rather than NATO troops to reinforce the idea the local government was taking things in hand.



*Weapons destruction session organised by the local army and documented by the Headquarters photographer for inclusion in Mostovi magazine
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Other trips, activities and visits

On a monthly basis, Robin travelled with the major commanding the PSYOPS groups to attend coordinating meetings with the Chief PSYOPS at higher headquarters. Most of these meetings were held in Camp Bitmur near Sarajevo. During one of these meetings, one of the participants expressed an interest in having the meetings held at different locations so that they could see each other's operations. When travelling to and from some of these meetings, Robin and his superior often took small detours to visit sites of interest, such as the site of the winter Olympics.



Picture of road formerly known as sniper alley. In 2004, the Civilian population was again using this road normally.

Photo provided by Robin Thibault



Photo of the bridge at Mostar in the French-German-Italian sector that had been rebuilt by NATO to symbolise the bringing together of the different groups

Photo provided by Robin Thibault

On one occasion, Robin was asked to participate in a shooting competition organised by the Armed Forces of the Srpska Republic (the Serbian half of Bosnia). He participated in the pistol shooting competition in which all participants were asked to use a Russian Tokarev pistol. The team representing the Republic of Srpska placed first in the competition. Robin remembers that it was his first time interacting with officers from the two armies of the new Bosnian Federation. The soldiers from the Republic of Srpska wore a uniform in the Soviet style whereas the soldiers from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina wore a uniform that resembled those worn by American soldiers. The two armies were trying to break the ice and seemed polite to each other.

On another occasion, Robin had the opportunity to briefly work with the local civil defense organisation. When Rob arrived at the HQ, he found that his predecessor had been overseeing the preparation of a video that could be used to explain a weapons harvest operation to the local population. The video was almost complete except for a sequence that showed how the explosives were destroyed at the end of the operation. Since Robin had purchased a high-quality video camera just before leaving Canada, he volunteered to film the sequence himself with his own camera.



*Local civil protection authorities arrive to help Robin film the destruction of munitions – this film clip was needed for a larger movie that was being prepared by the PSYOPS team
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Arrangements were made with the local civil defense organisation to destroy some explosives and make the film. They showed up in their blue truck marked with the yellow triangles carrying their blue protective gear. The demonstration worked well and the filmed segment was useable. Robin remembers however that it was very hot that day and the explosives experts from the civil defense organisation did not want to wear their blue protective clothing. They donned it only for a short time and asked Robin to take his pictures and video quickly so they could remove it and complete their work.



*Robin all kitted up in protective gear with his movie camera preparing to film a segment for an explosives awareness training video
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

*Picture of mine awareness training at a school – picture used in the Mostovi magazine
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Living quarters and mess life

Robin bunked in living quarters that had been installed on the grounds of the metal factory complex across the alleyway from the PSYOPS offices. He shared his accommodations with an Italian Carabinieri officer, who served as a liaison officer at the headquarters. When Robin moved into the accommodations, his predecessor sold him a TV that had been passed down through several successive rotations. He later found out from his Italian roommate that the price of the TV had been significantly inflated by its last owner.

He found that the HQ in Banja Luka had a good mess life. Mess members were issued cards that entitled them to consume 2 beers per day. Each time they were served a beer the bartender punched the client's card. These cards were printed by the PSYOPS team. Robin suspected at one point that some of the print shop staff may have been selling cards on the side but no one was ever caught in the act.

One day, during an INFO OPS meeting with LCol Broadfoot, Robin joked about finally having received from Canada a "PSYOPS influencing warfare device" that could be used to quell any belligerent. When those in attendance looked at him with a perplexed expression, he explained that he was referring to his bagpipes. He had just received them after having sent for them once established in his new accommodations. Robin started playing the pipes with the 401 Squadron Pipes and Drums when he was in the air cadets, and had maintained his skills ever since. Being a Highlander himself, LCol Broadfoot was delighted to hear about the presence of the pipes and asked Robin to play them the very next day when the headquarters was visited by a very important visitor and Highlander, General Allister Irwin – The Adjutant general of the British Forces and a former member of the Black Watch (UK). After listening to the music, the visiting general stopped to talk to Robin and to shake hands. He looked at Robin's nametag and inquired as to how it could be possible that a person with a French name like Thibault could be playing the pipes. Rather than recounting a long and potentially boring story, Robin jokingly responded that his real name was MacThibault, a name that some of Robin's friends used on occasion.

The news about the presence of the pipes circulated around the mess and Robin was subsequently asked by the General to play the bagpipes at his upcoming change of command parade at the Task Force headquarters. When he was asked to do this, Robin was told that he would be accompanied by Mike Bisson, another Hussar who was also deployed in Bosnia at the time and who was also in possession of his bagpipes. Mike and Robin had known each other for many years and had played together in the 306 Wing Air Force Association Pipes and Drums in Montreal, after the disbandment of the 401 Squadron. Being a gunner, the General had also requested that the artillery band from Shilo, Manitoba, perform at the parade. At the change of command ceremony, the two pipers as well as a third piper from the artillery band were stationed on top of the ramparts of an old castle where the change of command ceremony was held. The third piper originally wanted to lead the piping but when he heard the quality of Robin's and Mike's piping, he decided that it would be better to let them lead. Robin remembers playing an emotional rendition of Amazing Grace during which the pipes played the first verse alone and were then joined by the full band. The presence of the pipes was very appropriate because the incoming commander – British Brigadier Mark Dodson – was a Highlander.



Robin Thibault and Mike Bisson, both of the RCH and a third piper were asked to play their bagpipes at the General's change of command parade which was held in a medieval castle. The pipers were situated high up on the ramparts above the parade. Photo provided by Robin Thibault



Robin meeting a very important visitor and Highlander, General Allister Irwin – The Adjutant general of the British Forces and a former member of the Black Watch (UK).. Photo provided by Robin Thibault

As unusual as it may seem to have two armoured officers act as pipers for a change of command parade in collaboration with an artillery band, Robin felt honoured to have been able to participate in a tribute to a departing leader whom he greatly respected. Robin also found that his participation and his unusual skills helped him get to be known and meet people at the headquarters that he would otherwise never have met.

Vacation and leave

During his deployment, Robin was entitled to one longer leave (HTLA) and two shorter 96-hour leave periods. During his HTLA leave, he spent two and a half weeks visiting Tunisia and Corsica with Andreas Beauchamp, an intelligence operator from the headquarters. On the first 96-hour leave, he travelled to the Island of Vis off the coast of Croatia, where he attended a scuba-diving course organised for a group of Canadian soldiers. To get to the Island, the group travelled to the port city of Split, then took a ferry to the Island. Robin remembers an incident during this course when a fire broke out at the diving school. The soldiers on the course immediately leapt into action and quickly extinguished the fire themselves. While they were standing around congratulating each other and waiting for the course to resume, they heard a European-style siren coming from what they thought was an approaching fire engine. When this vehicle finally arrived, it turned out to be a two-wheeled moped equipped with a fire extinguisher and manned only by its driver. This was the island's fire department. Robin could hardly believe his eyes. On his second 96-hour leave, he went on another scuba diving vacation in Martar, Croatia with two of General Beare's drivers from the 12 RBC, Patrick Fortin and Duane White. The proximity of the beautiful Adriatic coast made this a popular destination for the Canadian soldiers.

Reflection on the importance of the PSYOPS mission

As he was preparing to leave, Robin reflected on the role of the PSYOPS team in the Bosnian conflict and his personal involvement. Over the period from 1991 to 1994, the Bosnian republic had descended into a hellish, bitter internal conflict among the three principal ethnic groups. Since the Dayton Peace accord had been reached in 1995, the opposing sides and their leaders had gone through a healing process and were trying to return to a normal state.

The NATO forces had been stationed in the area to help implement the Dayton accord and then to supervise and support it. While the traditional military units, with their weapons and armoured vehicles, were good first at separating the combatants and then at patrolling, confiscating weapons and addressing physical problems, they were not well equipped to have any enduring impacts on the thoughts and attitudes of the people. Without changes in those attitudes, war was likely to return as soon as the NATO forces departed. It was the responsibility of the PSYOPS teams to use a more sophisticated approach, to promote tolerance, and to foster a lasting peace. This was done using the tools at its disposition and by focusing on the younger generation and hoping that, as they grew up, the country would return to a more normal state. This was not something that the Canadian Armed Forces were typically equipped to do. However, because they were grouped with the British forces, they were able to benefit from the British Army's extensive PSYOPS capabilities and the strategies that it had developed over its extensive military history. The psychological operations must have had some impact in Bosnia because, in 2004, the ethnic communities had progressed sufficiently in their healing process that NATO decided that the mission could be downsized and passed over to the European Community.

Robin realized that his experience at Banja Luka was a very unique once-in-a-lifetime experience for an armoured officer. He was very happy to have been involved in this type of operation and to have gained an understanding of how it works and what benefits it might have. Finally, he was proud of the achievements of the PSYOPS team and his contribution to the team's success.

	
<p><i>Medals parade just before departure</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>	<p><i>Robin meeting other Canadian troops and Mike Bisson at a sidewalk café near the end of the tour when the troops had been instructed to mingle with the population in preparation for the downsizing of the mission.</i> <i>Photo provided by Robin Thibault</i></p>

Return to Canada

At the end of the rotation, Robin was replaced by Rob Knibbs, an officer from the Royal Regina Rifles in Saskatoon, who was responsible to wind down the operations. At that time, NATO was transferring its responsibility of overseeing the security of the country to EUFOR – which was a much smaller task force formed by the European Community. In the following months, the PSYOPS operation at the metal factory was dismantled.

Robin returned to Canada with a contingent of other Canadian soldiers. They arrived on September 26th at Quebec City, where he was met by his family.

Upon his return to the unit in Montreal, he expressed his interest in going on another mission to the Deputy Commanding Officer of the Royal Canadian Hussars. Shortly after that, based on his PSYOPS experience, he was given a class B call out at the PSTC in Kingston, Ontario, and headed off on another adventure.

Life thereafter

At the time of the interviews, Robin Thibault was serving as a member of the Royal Canadian Hussars as a captain and squadron commander for its reconnaissance squadron. He was also employed in Montreal as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police where he was part of the C Division Integrated National Security Team (INSET). He had left the Regiment when he first joined the RCMP but had opted to return when his civilian employment brought him back to Montreal.

Being a hussar and meeting other Hussars



*Chance meeting with some other Hussars while on the road. They were working in the 12 RBC Recce squadron
From Left to Right: Lt. Mike Bisson, Lt Robin Thibault, Cpl Duplessis, and Cpl Pierre-Jean Pilon.
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

“When in Bosnia, I always appreciated meeting other Hussars in the field, whether it was the troops serving in the 12 RBC recce squadron or Hussars working in other capacities. Whether in the field or in sidewalk cafés or on leave, or whether they were officers, senior NCO’s or junior ranks, I always felt a strong affinity with them. Those of us that had the privilege of working in Bosnia or Croatia over the 12 years of UN and NATO involvement can all accept a small portion of the credit for having helped that country and its population to return to some degree of normality. From the UN mandate, to the Dayton peace accord, to the hand over to EUFOR, members of the Royal Canadian Hussars and other members of the Canadian Armed Forces have earned their place in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

Robin Thibault, August 28, 2015

Footnotes

¹According to Wikipedia, Psychological Operations are planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behaviour of governments, organizations, groups and individuals.

²The Defence Intelligence and Security Centre (DISC) is the location of the headquarters of both the Defence College of Intelligence and the British Army Intelligence Corps. It is located at Chicksands, Bedfordshire, approximately 35 miles (56 km) north of London.

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