Review article

Gorazde: the peacekeepers’ tale

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The July 1995 siege of the ‘safe area’ of Srebrenica and the massacre of up to 7,000 men and boys is well known. By contrast, the story of the ‘safe area’ of Gorazde is familiar only to the ranks of Bosnia specialists. Yet Gorazde was by far the largest of the three ‘eastern enclaves’—the third being tiny Zepa—which were not ethnically cleansed of their Muslim populations in the first phase of the Serb campaign in the summer of 1992. It was in these enclaves that forces loyal to the Sarajevo-based Bosnian government held out into 1995. General Ratko Mladic, commander of the Bosnian Serb army (BSA) would have to take Gorazde before he could concentrate on a final push against Bosnian forces further to the west. The fate of Gorazde—as indeed of the eastern enclaves as a whole—was of crucial political and psychological important to President Izetbegovic of Bosnia, for it was on the strength of this toehold that the territorial claim to areas which had once enjoyed a Muslim majority or plurality could be articulated.

Of course, this is not the first time that the story of Gorazde, or parts of it, has been told in English. The Serb attack in April 1994 and the role of the SAS is covered by the pseudonymous Cameron Spence in *All necessary measures* (Penguin, 1998) and by Nick Richardson, the pilot of a downed Harrier in *No escape zone* (Little, Brown, 2000). A different—in places literary—perspective can be found in *Fighting for peace* (Harvill, 1998), the memoir of the UNPROFOR commander, Sir Michael Rose. The soldier’s perspective is already known in outline from Jonathan Riley’s compilation, *White dragon: the Royal Welch Fusiliers in Bosnia* (Wrexham, 1995). Finally, there is the unorthodox but highly informative cartoon account of the siege in Joe Sacco’s *Safe area Gorazde: the war in eastern Bosnia, 1992–5* (Fantagraphics, 2000).

There is no author more qualified to add to our picture of the siege of Gorazde than the investigative journalist Gillian Sandford, who together with the experienced radio producer, Mike Price, has compiled the double CD-ROM under review here. Her forthcoming study of the enclave—*Wheel of fire*—will
surely be definitive. In the meantime, we have been treated to a fascinating piece in the Observer Magazine on the crisis of May 1995 in Gorazde, which anticipated some of the material contained in this collection. Her most recent article in the Canadian National Post, on the role of the SAS and the United Nations Military Observer team in Gorazde in 1994, was a sensation; it showed that UNPROFOR commander Michael Rose had at the time and in his subsequent memoir sought to play down the threat of a Serb attack, the gravity of which was described to him by his own SAS observers.

If Northern Ireland was the quintessential ‘corporals’ war’, Bosnia has been described as a ‘captains’ war’. It has produced its fair share of fascinating, if problematic, accounts by junior or middle-ranking officers, such as Vaughan Kent-Payne’s Bosnia warrior: living on the front line (Robert Hale, 1998) and Milos Stankovic’s extraordinary Trusted mole: a soldier’s journey into the heart of darkness (HarperCollins, 2000). Against this background, Gorazde: the peacekeepers’ tale is a remarkable document. So far the rank and file have largely appeared as anonymous press quotations, or through the benevolent, but often patronizing and distorting lenses of their superiors. In this CD-ROM, the men—and some junior officers—of three battalions of the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment and the Royal Welch Fusiliers speak at length about their experiences. This is, as the producers point out, the first detailed account of tactical peacekeeping based on primary source material.

At one level, the reminiscences conform to type. There are the familiar atmospherics—minefields blundered into, scrimshanking Frenchmen and Egyptians, dramatic escapes down wooded gulleys, and a walnut-cracking General Mladic warning of trouble ahead. There is also the obligatory resort to cliché and popular culture, a sure sign of authenticity. ‘It smelt of death’ says one; ‘it was like “Apocalypse now”’ says another. Irritatingly and equally authentically, the armed forces of the legitimate government of Bosnia-Herzegovina are almost invariably referred to as ‘the Muslims’.

Yet in important respects, The peacekeepers’ tale is very different from other military literature generated by the war in Bosnia. There are no doctrinal reflections on the nature of the mandate: here the men seem to have instinctively realized that the United Nations Security Council resolutions—issued under Chapter VII of the Charter—gave them the authority to use decisive force where it was available to them. There is none of the barrack-room anthropology about Balkan character traits which garnishes the recollections of some of their superiors. There are far fewer of the jaundiced vignettes of the Bosnian defenders that disfigure the account of Jonathan Riley, the courageous but politically naïve commanding officer of the Royal Welch, in White dragon. There is no tilting at the Americans, and none of the ‘stagfights’ with NATO which characterize other narratives; just a concentration on the job at hand.

What distinguished peacekeeping in Gorazde, as opposed to other parts of Bosnia, particularly Dutch-garrisoned Srebrenica, was robustness. The soldiers mince no words about the humiliation they sometimes suffered, especially at...
the hands of the BSA men manning roadblocks. One man describes his fury as a whole convoy was held up by a solitary Serb militiaman; another recalls his frustration at being reduced to a ‘puppet’ by ‘an unprofessional pack of yobs’, the BSA, who confiscated personal belongings such as cameras. But the men gradually began to establish an ascendancy over the much more numerous and heavily armed Serb besiegers. The CD-ROM abounds with gripping blow by blow accounts of how the Duke of Wellington and the Royal Welch extricated themselves from Serb ambushes, cleared the Serbs off the high ground, and defused confrontations between the besiegers and the Bosnian garrison. They managed, as the soldiers themselves put it, to ‘dominate’ the Serbs from the very beginning. At times this involved, according to one witness, ‘literally manhandling’ the Serbs out of their trenches, at others simply preventing the Serbs from reneging on agreements already entered into. This was a very dangerous business, which led not merely to a number of accidental deaths but also to the killing of one soldier of the Duke of Wellington’s regiment. An unknown but much larger number of Serbs were shot dead or wounded.

The high point in the story is the intrepid defence of some of the high ground overlooking the city in May 1995. Despite the fact that the Serbs had taken more than 30 of their number hostage in retaliation from NATO air strikes near Sarajevo and despite their technical and numerical inferiority, the men of the Royal Welch Fusiliers held on long enough to allow the Bosnian government troops to reach the position and repel the attack. This engagement was significant not only for the fact that it almost certainly saved the ‘safe area’ from collapse, but also for the palpable sympathy for the Bosnian army—whose troops were ‘willed’ up the mountains—shown by the British force.

Less admirable was the incident described at the end of the second CD-ROM. After the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995, the Bosnian garrison became increasingly concerned about a Serb attack and sought to equip themselves against it as best they could. Given their desperate situation, they could be forgiven for trying to relieve the UN forces of supplies and weapons, particularly as the British government was one of the most ardent upholders of the international arms embargo, which so disadvantaged the Bosnian government (something which is mentioned at no point by any of the men featured in the CD-ROM). The resulting ‘attack’ on the camp was not an assault against the Royal Welch, as such, but a frantic attempt by the Bosnians to acquire the wherewithal to defend themselves. It is regrettable that none of the soldiers seem to recognize the tragic irony of the men they killed in this engagement—men who had died at the hands of the very force sent to deter attacks on their town.

Gorazde was the massacre that did not happen and British soldiers played a part in ensuring this. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the broader context. While not denying that individual acts of courage took place, it should be noted that the success in overawing the Bosnian Serbs was primarily due to the threat of a massive NATO air attack. This threat had forced the Serbs to call off the siege in 1994 and enabled the force to be inserted in the first place. At the
same time and paradoxically, British troops and UNPROFOR in general were an obstruction to the necessary military action against the Bosnian Serbs. For example, decisive air strikes had to be put on hold during the ‘Hostage Crisis’ of May 1995. It was only when the Royal Welch finally left in August 1995 that the shackles came off NATO and Gorazde was finally to be safe. The Bosnian defenders knew this, which is why they allowed the Royal Welch—much to the surprise of their commander—to extricate themselves unopposed.

This CD-ROM shows that most men of the Duke of Wellington and the Royal Welch generally discharged a difficult, and at times futile, task with distinction. Theirs is a story that deserved to be told, and Gillian Sandford’s compilation tells it well.