

The United States Air Force and Bosnia, 1992-1995





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(Overleaf) The U.S. Air Force did not go it alone in Bosnia, as the presence of these NATO allies' aircraft can attest.

SERBIAN MILITARY FORCES IN BOSNIA, ARMED WITH RESOURCES OF THE FORMER YUGO-SLAVIAN ARMY PROVIDED BY MILOSEVIC, SOON GAINED CONTROL OF TWO-THIRDS OF THE COUNTRY AND SURROUNDED SARAJEVO

In 1990, the Communist Party in Yugoslavia, like those in other eastern European states, gave up its monopoly of power. Not long afterwards, Serbs in Belgrade under President Slobadan Milosevic began to dominate the federation politically. Other ethnic groups began agitating for independence of the type being successfully achieved peacefully in the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.¹

As early as May 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from the rest of Yugoslavia. Slovenia had few Serbs, and seceded relatively peacefully, but the thousands of Serbs living in Croatia resisted its independence, and a civil war resulted. Col. Ratko Mladic, a Yugoslavian People's Army commander, launched an "ethnic cleansing" campaign in Croatia to assure that large parts of the country remained under Serbian control. Before long, Serbs controlled one-third of the territory.²

On January 15, 1992, the European Community recognized the independence of both Slovenia and Croatia. Major factions agreed to a truce in January 1992, and a United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) entered Croatia. Despite the arrival of the UN peacekeeping forces there, ethnic violence continued.³

In March 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a large territory between Croatia and Serbia, also declared independence from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia and named Sarajevo as its new capital. Bosnian Serbs under Dr. Radovan Karadzic declared their own independence from the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina and sought the support of Slobodan Milosevic in neighboring Serbia. General Mladic, who had led Yugoslavian and Serbian forces in Croatia, moved into Bosnia to support Karadzic and the Serbs there. A civil war ensued between Bosnian Serbs and Muslims.⁴

On April 6, 1992, the United States recognized the independence of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbian military forces in Bosnia, armed with resources of the former Yugoslavian army provided by Milosevic, soon gained control of two-thirds of the country and surrounded Sarajevo, cutting off the capital from its traditional sources of supply. At this point, the United States began airlifting food, medical supplies, and blankets from stockpiles stored in Italy to Bosnia and Croatia.⁵

At the end of June, the United Nations Security Council extended the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to Bosnia to protect the flow of humanitarian relief supplies to the Sarajevo airport. United Nations forces took control of the airport and authorized an international airlift of humanitarian supplies to the Bosnian capital.

For its part of the international airlift, the United States inaugurated Operation PROVIDE PROMISE on July 3, 1992. U.S. Air Force elements took part in a joint task force under United States European Command. Col. Patrick M. Henry, USAF Vice-Commander of the 435th Airlift Wing at Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, served as the operation's first mobility commander. The wing's 37th Airlift Squadron flew the initial PROVIDE PROMISE missions, using four-engined C-130s that flew from Rhein-Main.⁶

The Bosnian Serbs benefited from a regional arms embargo because they inherited most of the arms remaining in Bosnia that had belonged to the Yugoslavian army. Moreover, Yugoslavia's air force, which had essentially become the air force of Serbia, supported the Bosnian Serbs in their civil war with the Muslims and Croats of the country. On October 16, 1992, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 781 that banned all military flights over Bosnia. Although the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) monitored such flights in an operation called SKY WATCH (SKY MONITOR), it had no authority to enforce the ban.⁷

At the end of March 1993, the United Nations passed Resolution 816, which banned all flights over Bosnia-Herzegovina not authorized by the United Nations. It also authorized NATO to enforce the ban on military flights by shooting down violators. A "dual key" concept permitted military action only with the approval of both the local UN and NATO commanders. The result was the first NATO combat operation in its history: Operation DENY FLIGHT, which began on April 12, 1993. Operation PROVIDE PROMISE continued as its humanitarian counterpart.⁸

The United States was one of many nations taking part in Operation DENY FLIGHT. The 5th Allied Tactical Air Force (5 ATAF) controlled NATO air resources for Operation DENY FLIGHT. Fighter

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trous-Ghali authorized his representative for the region, Ambassador Yasushi Akashi, to veto NATO close air support missions. When NATO authorized retaliatory air strikes in Bosnia-Herzegovina in August, Boutros-Ghali insisted on exercising his own power to veto them.¹⁰

The crisis in Bosnia encouraged France to associate more closely with the NATO alliance from which she had withdrawn its military forces in 1966. On February 18, 1994, USAF aircraft deployed to France for the first time in more than twenty years. Five KC-135 tankers flew from French bases to refuel NATO aircraft patrolling the airspace over Bosnia-Herzegovina during Operation DENY FLIGHT.¹¹

On February 28, 1994, NATO engaged in combat for the first time in its history. A British airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft crew flying over Hungary detected at least six Serbian J-21 Jastreb-Galeb jet aircraft that were attacking a factory in the Banja Luka area of Bosnia and warned them to land, exit the no-fly zone, or be engaged. The AWACS crew also contacted a flight of two F-16s from the 526th Fighter Squadron (86th Fighter Wing), that were patrolling over Mostar in southern Bosnia. Although already low on fuel, the F-16 pilots quickly flew to the area, spotted the Serbian airplanes, and repeated the warning. The Serbian pilots did not respond, but continued their air strikes on ground targets, in clear violation of the no-fly zone. Cleared to fire, Capt. Robert G. Wright launched one of his radar-guided AIM-120 missiles and destroyed one of the Serbian aircraft. The rest of the J-21s quickly descended to a lower altitude to reduce their radar signature. Captain Wright shot down two more of the Jastreb-Galebs, using shorter-range heat seeking AIM-9 missiles. His total was three that day. His wingman, Capt. Scott F. O'Grady also fired an AIM-9 missile at one of the fleeing enemy airplanes, but missed. Wright and O'Grady departed to refuel, turning over the mission to two other F-16 pilots from their squadron, who had come to relieve them. Capt. Stephen L. Allen used another AIM-9 heat-seeking missile to destroy a fourth Jastreb-Galeb, but the remaining two Serbian jets escaped the no-fly zone and returned to their base at Udbina in the Serbian-dominated part of Croatia.¹²

On April 10, two F-16 Fighting Falcons of the 512th Fighter Squadron struck a Bosnian Serb

aircraft from the USAF's 36th Wing at Bitburg Air Base in Germany, operating from Aviano Air Base in Italy, flew some of the earliest DENY FLIGHT missions. Air Force Special Operations Command units also took part in the new operation, with search and rescue aircraft operating out of Bridisi, Italy. A United States Navy carrier task force in the Adriatic Sea participated, as did USAF reconnaissance crews and airplanes from as far away as England. Operation DENY FLIGHT did not prevent all non-authorized military flights. It largely ignored helicopter flights because so many of them carried civilians or displayed Red Cross symbols.⁹

On July 22, the UN Security Council authorized NATO close air support missions and offensive air strikes to protect UN forces in the former Yugoslavia. UN Secretary-General Boutros Bou-

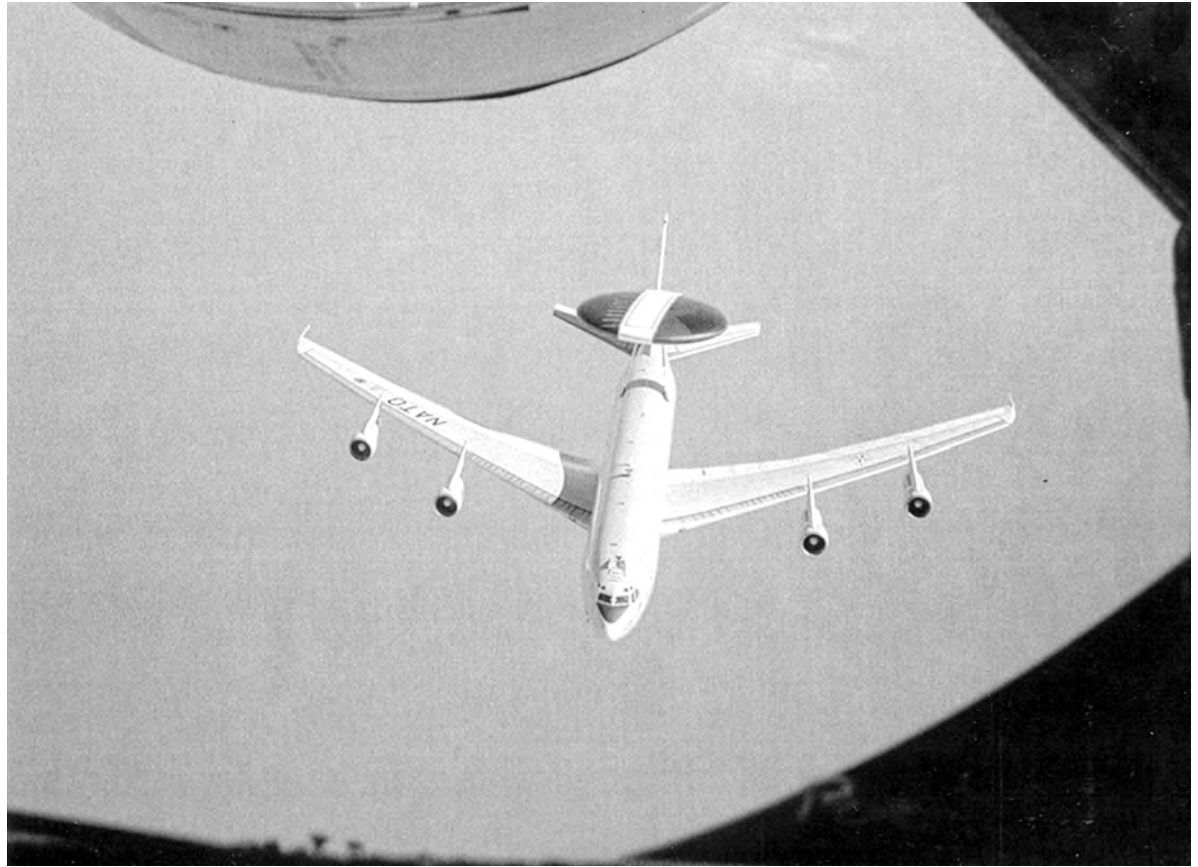
HIS WINGMAN, CAPT. SCOTT F. O'GRADY ALSO FIRED AN AIM-9 MISSILE AT ONE OF THE FLEEING ENEMY AIRPLANES, BUT MISSED

Serbian Aircraft Shot Down by USAF Aircraft, February 28, 1994

Type	USAF aircraft & Weapon	Victor	Squadron/Group
J-21 Jastreb-Galeb	F-16C, AIM-120	Capt. Robert G. Wright	526th/86th
J-21 Jastreb-Galeb	F-16C, AIM-9	Capt. Robert G. Wright	526th/86th
J-21 Jastreb-Galeb	F-16C, AIM-9	Capt. Robert G. Wright	526th/86th
J-21 Jastreb-Galeb	F-16C, AIM-9	Capt. Stephen L. Allen	526th/86th

Source: Department of the Air Force Special Order GB-228 dated May 27, 1994.

A NATO AWACS refuels during Operation Deny Flight.



THE SERBS RESPONDED BY SEIZING UN PERSONNEL AS HOSTAGES, AND AGAIN THE UN INSISTED THAT NATO TEMPORARILY SUSPEND ITS AIR STRIKES

artillery command post near Gorazde, after Bosnian Serb forces attacked UN personnel in the enclave. This was the first close air support mission of Operation DENY FLIGHT, and the first air-to-ground bombing in NATO history. In retaliation, the Bosnian Serbs took more than 150 UN personnel as hostages, and caused the UN to ask NATO to suspend air strikes.¹³

In November, NATO leaders convinced UN leaders to approve the largest alliance air raid yet against an airfield at Udbina, a Serb-controlled area from which aircraft had raided Bosnia in violation of the DENY FLIGHT no-fly zone. Capt. Brent Johnson, an F-15E pilot, led the raid, which targeted not only the airfield but also Bosnian Serb surface-to-air missile sites in the area. As had happened in April, the Serbs responded by seizing UN personnel as hostages, and again the UN insisted that NATO temporarily suspend its air strikes.¹⁴

Operation DENY FLIGHT suffered setbacks in 1995. On June 2, USAF Captain Scott O'Grady of the 31st Fighter Wing's 555th Fighter Squadron patrolled the skies over northwestern Bosnia in daylight when his F-16C fighter was brought down by an SA-6 surface-to-air missile guided by radar. O'Grady ejected safely. He was rescued by USMC helicopters from a USN task force in the Mediterranean Sea on June 8 after evading Bosnian Serb forces for six days.¹⁵

U.S. Air Force organizations and personnel took part in the rescue. On June 8, KC-135 tanker crews from the 107th Air Refueling Group and the 157th Air Refueling Group, from New York and New Hampshire respectively, flying out of Istres, France,

refueled fighters covering the rescue helicopters. A crew from the 107th had also refueled O'Grady's own F-16 before it was shot down.¹⁶

The summer of 1995, the U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) centralized control of Operation DENY FLIGHT aircraft by activating the provisional 7490th Wing at Aviano Air Base, Italy. Col. Charles F. Wald, who was already commander of the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano, served as commander of the new wing. The United States also deployed its new Predator unmanned reconnaissance aerial vehicle to Albania in an operation called NOMAD VIGIL.¹⁷

The fall of two UN-declared safe areas in Bosnia—Srebrenica and Zepa—to the Serbs, aroused NATO and the UN to action. Western military leaders meeting in London on July 20 and 21 warned the Bosnian Serbs that any attack on Gorazde, the most threatened of the four remaining safe areas in Bosnia, would provoke a "decisive response." A few days later, the North Atlantic Council met and committed NATO to defend Gorazde. On August 1, NATO extended the Gorazde ultimatum to the other three safe areas in Bosnia, including Sarajevo. Bosnian Serb attacks on any of the four remaining enclaves would provoke a NATO/UN military response.¹⁸

On August 22, the Serbs shelled Sarajevo, killing six and wounding almost forty. The UN commander removed his forces from Gorazde to prevent the Bosnian Serbs from taking them as hostages, as they had in response to previous air strikes. He also accepted reinforcement of his troops by the recently introduced European Rapid Reaction Force. The

An Aviano-based F-16C lands during Operation Deliberate Force.



THE BOSNIAN SERBS IGNORED UN AND NATO WARNINGS AND INCREASED THEIR PRESSURE ON SARAJEVO

stage was set for a more decisive air operation in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁹

The Bosnian Serbs ignored UN and NATO warnings and increased their pressure on Sarajevo. On August 28, they shelled the capital again, this time killing thirty-seven and wounding eighty. It was time for the UN and NATO to deliver on their threat of retaliatory air strikes. By agreement, such strikes required the approval of the regional commanders of both NATO and the UN. NATO's Admiral Leighton Smith quickly approved, but UN Lt. Gen. Bernard Janvier was attending his son's wedding in France. His deputy, Lt. Gen. Rupert Smith of the United Kingdom, approved the air strikes in Janvier's place. The two keys had been turned, and NATO prepared to embark on Operation DELIBERATE FORCE, its first major combat operation.²⁰

Operation DELIBERATE FORCE commenced on August 29, the day after the Bosnian Serbs resumed the shelling of Sarajevo. USAF Lt. Gen. Michael Ryan served as Admiral Smith's air component commander at the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), to which he had already gone for an exercise. Ryan listed targets for Admiral Smith's and the UN commander's approval. While most of the air strikes came from land-based fighters at Aviano Air Base in Italy, which were already conducting Operation DENY FLIGHT missions over Bosnia, Admiral Smith ordered the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* to the Adriatic Sea to increase the number of fighters available.²¹

The second phase of the operation, which lasted until September 13, included air strikes on the

Bosnian Serb air defense network in northwestern Bosnia. Using stand-off munitions launched from aircraft, General Ryan targeted command, control, and communication facilities, which crippled harder-to-hit enemy missile batteries that had previously threatened DENY FLIGHT missions. The cruiser USS *Normandy* also launched seven Tomahawk missiles against Bosnian Serb command and control targets. Continued air strikes on these and other enemy military sites weakened the Bosnian Serbs.²²

Operation DELIBERATE FORCE was the first combat air campaign in which precision-guided munitions outweighed conventional munitions dropped. UN Lt. Gen. Rupert Smith, who was familiar with vulnerable sites in Bosnia, nominated close air support targets. Ryan sometimes planned to strike an enemy facility at two o'clock in the morning, hoping it would be unoccupied. Milosevic himself admitted that there were only twenty-five fatalities in the entire air campaign.²³

Operation DELIBERATE FORCE officially ended on September 21, 1995, after air strikes and a combined Bosnian-Croatian ground offensive had left less than half of Bosnia in the hands of the Bosnian Serbs. The allied coalition had flown a total of 3,485 sorties, 2,444 of them by "shooters," or aircraft launching weapons. The actual munitions dropped or launched totaled fewer 500 tons, but that relatively low number obscures the fact that the air campaign was more effective than many others in earlier conflicts because the majority of the 1,026 bombs or missiles dropped or fired were the more accurate precision-guided munitions.²⁴

A C-17 takes off during Operation Provide Promise.



THE PRESIDENTS OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA, CROATIA, AND SERBIA MET...AND PRODUCED AN AGREEMENT TO END THE WAR IN BOSNIA

The Bosnian Serbs were more willing to negotiate when they learned on October 23 that Russia, Serbia's old ally, would furnish part of the peacekeeping force in Bosnia. Between October 31 and

An F-15 refuels during Operation Deny Flight.



November 21, the presidents of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia met at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and produced an agreement to end the war in Bosnia and designate sectors for Serbs and non-Serbs. On December 14, international leaders signed a peace agreement in Paris to confirm the Wright-Patterson accords.²⁵

Operation DENY FLIGHT, which had enforced a United Nations no-fly zone over Bosnia-Herzegovina since April 1993, officially ended on December 20. At the same time, the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR), under Admiral Smith, replaced the United Nations Protection Force (UNPF) in Bosnia and assumed the task of enforcing the peace agreement.

On January 9, 1996, after three and one half years, PROVIDE PROMISE officially ended. It was the longest sustained humanitarian airlift in history. Since early July 1992, aircraft from twenty-one countries had taken part in the operation, flying a total of 12,886 sorties and delivering 159,622 tons of food, medicine, and other supplies to Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The operation provided 95 percent of the city's supplies and evacuated some 1,300 wounded civilians. The United States flew 4,553 sorties and delivered 62,802 metric tons of cargo. Besides landing cargo at Sarajevo's airport, USAF transports had also flown 2,222 sorties to drop food rations to isolated safe areas within Bosnia that had been surrounded by Serb military forces. Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard organizations provided approximately 40 percent of the airlift of Operation PROVIDE PROMISE. The opening of surface routes of transportation to the

Bosnian capital negated the need for further military airlift of humanitarian supplies to its airport.²⁶

The Bosnian crisis proved to be pivotal in the history of NATO and the U.S. Air Force. The UN allowed NATO to be its enforcement instrument in the former Yugoslavia, and for the first time, NATO embarked on a combat operation. France drew closer to NATO, allowing U.S. Air Force tankers to be based in and fly missions from France. Operation DELIBERATE FORCE was the first air campaign in history to use more precision-guided

weapons than “dumb” bombs. For the first time, the Predator unmanned aerial vehicle entered a combat zone. In Bosnia the C-17 transport first entered a major overseas operation. In Operation PROVIDE PROMISE, the Air Force had taken part in the longest sustained humanitarian airlift in history. Despite all the successes, the crisis in the former Yugoslavia was not yet over. Albanians within the Serbian province of Kosovo began to agitate for independence, and another conflict loomed before the end of the decade.²⁷ ■

NOTES

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