Cru, Jean-Norton. Temoins: Préface et post-face de Frédéric Rousseau. Paris: Presses Universitaires De Nancy, 2006.

Personne n’ignore aujourd’hui à quel point de nombreux rescapés de 14-18 sont revenus profondément pacifistes et ont œuvré dans leurs associations d’anciens combattants en faveur de la paix. Ce que l’on sait moins, c’est que des combattants, durant la guerre elle-même, n’ont cessé de poser et de se poser ces deux courtes questions : comment bâtir la paix? Comment empêcher le retour de la guerre?

C’est précisément en 1929 que l’un d’entre eux (rescapés de 14-18), après un travail acharné de quinze ans, a propos une forte réponse (sous la forme d’’un gros livre intitulé *Témoins. Essai d’analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en franâis den 1915 à 1928*, ouvrage qui passe au crible de la critique plus de trois cents témoignages de guerre. P. S3 (Postface de Rousseau)

Jean-Norton Cru s’est assigné la mission de dire à ses contemporains et à leurs descendants la *vérité* sur la guerre, dans l’espoir d’en empêcher le retour. P 58

(parlant de romans de la guerre comme celui de jean jacques ernest renaud) qu’il trouve bien médiocres, voire « dangereux » : ils prêchent la haine. P. S8

Résurrection des souvenirs d’un passé mort (p. S8)

Citation de JN Cru : « Si nous, combattants, nous pouvions peindre notre guerre avec assez de vérité et d’art pour que les hommes de demain, nous lisant, éprouvent mentalement des souffrances assez identiques à celles que nous avons éprouvées réellement, alors le problème de a paix permanente serait résolu, la guerre deviendrait impossible, non pas matériellement, mais bien mieux : impossible à concevoir, à accepter dans l’esprit. Maillet crois que c’est impossible. C’est parce que je coirs le contraire – et uniquement pour cette raison – que j’ai entrepris de faire connaître l’œuvre de Maillet et e ses pairs (S12) – témoins, p. 366

1. CARTHASIS D’ARISTOTE
2. C’EST VRAI PARCE QU’IMPOSSIBLE D’Y CROIRE

Pourquoi faire de nous des héros et des saints, quand nous ne sommes que des bêtes de somme qui marchent sous le fouet du bouvier? – Cru p. 423 – Postface S19

Gaudard, François-Charles et Suarez, Modesta, sous la direction de, *Formes discursives du témoignage*, Toulouse : Éditions Universitaires du Sud, 2004.

« Non seulement il paraît intéressant de replacer le témoignage dans les possibles de ses contextes sociologiques et peut-être même ethnographique, mais la qualification même du témoin et de son discours, le rituel situationnel et langagier, ainsi que le rapport même du « dire », de « l’écrire » et de « la vérité » posent nombre de problèmes. Sans compter que détour par le poétique conduit à interroger les possibilités mêmes des langues à dire le vrai, particulièrement lorsqu’on leur demande de rendre compte de l’indicible, de l’incompréhensible, de l’inacceptable ou de l’inconcevable. Comment la langue dont l’une des fonctions essentielles relève de la socialisation des individus pourrait-elle parler « réellement » de ce qui déstructure jusqu’à l’extrême tous les liens, toutes les valeurs et tous les fondements du « social »? D’un point de vue plus rigoureusement linguistique, seuls les faits et les objets du monde sont vrais : tenter de les « dire » dans leur réalité, revient à en « parler » seulement, c’est-à-dire à tenter volontairement ou malgré soi de se les approprier et par voie de conséquence de les interpréter, ce qui, dans une certaine mesure, revient à les « fictionnaliser » : étrange renversement, qui conduit au paradoxe et à l’aporie, puisque le témoignage situé dans son nécessaire cadre discursive finit par s’inscrire soit du côté de « la vérité d’opinion » dont on connaît l’importance rhétorique, soit du côté de l’impossibilité et donc de la feinte et du détour. » (Gaudard et Suarez, « Avant-propos », p.8)

 Ce passage présente sous une forme condensée le résumé des thèmes majeurs abordés par les auteurs du recueil. Plus loin, les éditeurs décrivent la logique du libellé de l’ouvrage. Ils prélèvent les trois temps de l’organisation des articles. D’abord, ce sont les travaux situant le témoignage dans ses contextes historique, sociologique et discursif. « Le témoignage est étudié dans ses dimensions rhétoriques et poétiques : à travers la trilogie d’Albert Camus, c’est tout le rapport du langage au vrai, à dire « le vrai » ou à « faire croire au vrai » qui est abordé, dans le cadre d’une actualisation littéraire de la rhétorique judiciaire et de situations « représentatives » difficiles. » (Gaudard et Suarez, « Avant-propos », p. 8) Ensuite, viennent les textes où la poétique du témoignage est approfondie à partir de corpus spécificifiques d’Amérique latine.

« Dans le troisième et dernier temps d’étude, c’est toute l’importance et la difficulté des témoignages de guerre qui sont abordées, dans un soulignement quasiment continu des problèmes d’identité rencontrés par ces « grands témoins », militants, opposant à un régime, ou simples « chargés de mission » éthique, idéologique, voire politique. Comment accomplir individuellement et efficacement ce qui relève d’un « devoir collectif de mémoire et de réflexion »? […] Chez d’autres, la nécessité de témoigner s’inscrit dans la construction d’une anamnèse, qui s’accompagne d’un double regret, celui de ne pas pouvoir garder le souvenir dans toute son épaisseur et son intensité émotionnelles, et celui d’échouer dans la réalisation du désir de ré-accorder vie d’aujourd’hui et vie d’avant. […] De toutes façons, le témoignage, quel qu’il soit, ne cesse d’interroger le « je » s’instaurant « témoin », dans les relations aux discours qu’il est censé ou désire tenir : quel est ce « je » perpétuellement confronté à la nécessité de concilier narrativement le présent et le passé, et qui vise à restituer « l’histoire » telle qu’elle s’est réellement passée, tout en étant le sujet « multiple » d’une énonciation où sa place « réelle » ne peut être qu’instable? » (Gaudard et Suarez, « Avant-propos », p. 9)

Ce recueil considère le témoignage non seulement en tant que compte rendu des événements passés à l’usage des ignorants. L’intérêt majeur se trouve dans la question fondamentale que se pose tout chercheur, tout herméneute face au témoignage des faits passés. Cette question interroge ce dont on témoigne. S’il est uniquement question de récréer soigneusement la mise-en-scène et les actes de la pièce manquée, il suffit en effet d’en parler ou d’en écrire. Mais le parler et l’écrire présupposent tous les deux le choix de la manière, de l’accent, des teints de signification. Or, il n’y a pas de témoignage stérile, on témoigne toujours des événements qui passent par le filtre de la perception. C’est pour cette raison que plusieurs auteurs de cette collection de textes parlent de la problématique identitaire qui fait intégralement partie de toute réflexion sur le témoignage. Autrement dit, témoigner, ce n’est pas seulement décrire tous les détails d’un tissu de la réalité matérielle, c’est aussi et même plus en tisser un autre – celui dans lequel s’incorpore le « je » du témoin.

Cette observation mène vers une autre, celle-ci concernant le témoignage du fait guerrier. Parler et décrire fait usage de la langue qui ne facilite la communication qu’à condition d’être basée sur quelque logique respectée et partagée par les locuteurs et les lecteurs. Alors, la difficulté arrive quand il s’agit de décrire ce qui ne se prête à aucune logique, ce qui défie tout raisonnement. C’est ici, dans la zone qui se veut la plus documentaire que le témoignage devient le plus littérarisé.

François Rastier, « Primo Levi – Prose du témoin, poèmes du survivant », dans *Formes discursives du témoignage.*

p. 145 « Fait concordant, Levi établissait un lien entre la forme poétique et Auschwitz, quand à la formule d’Adorno prétendant qu’on ne pouvait plus écrire de poésie après Auschwitz, il rétorquait : « après Auschwitz, on ne peut plus écrire de poésie, sinon sur Auschwitz ». Or, Levi a souvent souligné que sans la mission du témoignage que échoit aux survivants, il ne serait sans doute pas devenu écrivain. Nous sommes ainsi fondé à penser que les poèmes de Levi, malgré le peu d’estime qu’il leur témoigne et le peu de cas qu’en fait la critique, sont au centre de son œuvre. »

Levi a été beaucoup influencé par Dante dans sa structuralisation de ses écrits. Dans sa prose, Levi préfère la description de l’espace du témoignage qui emprunte à l’*Enfer*. Le narrateur y descend et décrit ce qu’il voit. Par contre, dans ses poèmes « il adopte la vision du dessous, comme les damnés chez Dante. […] C’est l’indice que les poèmes sont écrits par un témoin englouti, les proses par un rescapé. Comme les poèmes ont pécédé la prose, ils ont ainsi annoncé l’engloutissement final du rescapé. » (p. 146)

L’allégorèse inversée : p. 147 « Si l’*Enfer* de Dante devient en quelque sorte une allégorie d’Auschwitz, ce n’est l’*Enfer* qui permet de comprendre Auschwitz, mais Auschwitz qui prive de sens l’*Enfer* même. »

Donner la parole : p. 148 « Dans la prose du témoignage, il reste impossible de faire parler les défunts, puisque le témoin ne peut inventer les propos qu’il rapporte. En affichant la fiction, la prosopopée rend au survivant la liberté de recréer toute parole. L’écriture rend la parole au mort; et le témoin maintient en vie le survivant. Le survivant en effet craint de vivre à la place d’un autre, et tente sans espoir de lui rendre la parole, de lui restituer ainsi, imaginairement, la vie qu’il croit lui avoir pris. »

p. 150 « Les bourreaux nous accusent, étendent aux innocents la culpabilité qu’ils ne ressentent pas, car ils portent atteinte à notre humanité commune. Leur dénier l’humanité serait en quelque sorte leur victoire, puisqu’ils déniaient l’humanité de leurs victimes. Ils ne sont pas des monstres, et la honte que ressent Levi, c’est précisément de les savoir des hommes comme nous. » - voyons comment la subjectivité de l’auteur est en jeu ici, quand il s’agit de la manière de décrire les événements passés.

p. 151 « Dans ses poèmes, Levi donne la parole, plutôt qu’il ne la prend. Ils sont donc l’œuvre du survivant, plutôt que du témoin, car le témoignage s’exprime en prose, et le narrateur y parle à la première personne… Mais dans la prosopopée poétique, le Je d’attestation prend de tout autres formes, détournées. »

Poésie et hantise : p. 153 « Le témoignage n’est d’abord qu’un document. Par son objectivité publique, il se destine à l’histoire et refuse d’afficher la subjectivité du vécu. Dès lors qu’il n’est pas l’objet d’un regard d’historien, mais se propose au simple lecteur, il peut devenir distant malgré sa clarté même, car il est doublement daté dans le moment des faits et dans celui du récit. En revanche, la poésie n’est pas datée, et la poésie de l’extermination n’ayant rien de circonspect, peut valoir leçon. Bref, le poème permet d’interpréter le témoignage. Il va en quelque sorte de l’explication à la compréhension : là où la prose explique, le poème comprend. Mais surtout, la poésie pose cette question qui hante les survivants : comment faire le deuil de millions de camarades, presque tous inconnus? Le témoignage, par lui-même, ne participe pas explicitement au travail du deuil. »

La Littérature refusée : p. 156 «  Le témoignage se dédie aux victimes. Il s’adresse aux survivants, aux contemporains, allemands et tous autres, ainsi qu’à la postérité : il leur donne mission de savoir le crime, de le juger, d’éviter son retour. Il se destine enfin aux bourreaux, car il dépose contre eux. Dédicace, adresse et destination ouvrent ensemble la collectivité humaine. »

Poésie témoignage : p. 157 « On admet ordinairement que la poésie requiert l’interprétation, mais non le témoignage : on oppose traditionnellement le mensonge (ou la vérité transcendante) de la poésie à la vérité, fût-elle controversée, du témoignage historique. C’est négliger que le mythe, par ses irruptions dans l’histoire, déclenche des massacres. »

p. 158 « Les vivants peuvent entendre, mais non comprendre. Les engloutis pourraient comprendre, mais n’entendront jamais. Dans cette communication à jamais impossible, le témoignage cependant a lieu. » - Pour combler cette faille, il semble mieux ne pas cultiver une illusion du témoignage objectif, mais embrasser la subjectivité et témoigner poétiquement, en espérant que l’émotif des vers provenant de l’âme du poète-témoin saura éveiller une réaction émotive chez les lecteurs.

Granatstein, J. L. and Bercuson, David J., *War and Peacekeeping : From South Africa to The Gulf – Canada’s Limited wars*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1991.

This book presents a concise history of Canadian military forces from the early years of its inception to the modern peacekeeping endeavours. The interesting aspect of the book is in the way it presents the stories. The presentations are either direct testimonies of the soldiers/journalists or the authors’ transcriptions of such testimonies. Given our interest in more recent Canadian engagements, I will forego the stories of the earlier campaigns, but will spend some time on noting how the book describes the Korean War from the Canadian prospective.

p.2 “Although the Korean War was officially an United Nations operation, it marked the first great confrontation between the 2 ideological poles of the 20th century, capitalism and Communism. As Britain’s power waned in the long ordeal of the 2nd World War, Canada had finally been forced to turn instead to the US. Throughout the 50s, as China loomed in the Orient and post-war Europe lay in a precarious balance between the vast and increasingly sophisticated armies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Canada’s military forces grew in maturity. The army, navy, and the air force became substantial forces of some 120,000 professional officers and enlisted personnel at their peak, and the defence budget rose to astronomical heights: in 1947, defence spending amounted to only 1.7 % of the GNP; in 1953, however, with the GNP substantially larger after years of boom, defence accounted for 7.6%. The Canadian Forces equipment, much of it produced in Canada, was first class, and morale was sky-high.

In this atmosphere of confidence and competence, Canada was able to begin responding to calls for UN peacekeepers around the world, from Kashmir to Cairo to Cambodia. In 1954, when an International Control Commission was formed to help end France’s colonial involvement in Indo-China, Canada agreed to play a key role even though the UN was not involved in any way. And 2 years later, when External Affairs minister Lester Pearson helped create the United Nations Emergency Force to cool the Suez crisis, Canada participated in a major way. Pearson’s Nobel Peace Prize told Canadians that their country had arrived on the world stage. Peacekeeping suddenly was something that Canadians did and did well, so much so that the UN came to depend on Canada’s good will and military competence. The Canadian media and public – if not necessarily the soldiers and flyers who found themselves stuck at a scruffy airfield in remote New Guinea or encamped at an observation post on the Golan Heights – were clearly in love with the ideal of their country helping to keep the world’s peace. Few thought of the dangers or the casualties that servicemen and women had to suffer in the Congo or Cyprus or along the border between Iran and Iraq. Eventually, even the staff officers at National Defence Headquarters came to see that peacekeeping was their best guarantee that Canada’s military would not go the way of the dodo. In peacekeeping, Canada has apparently found its métier. »

The Korean War :

p. 157 “As the UN forces approached the 38th parallel, the previous pattern of battle was repeated. Once again small units, usually no larger than companies, assaulted the Chinese, who were invariably dug in on strategic hill-tops. These were short, sharp, set-piece battles, with little of the sweep and movement that modern warfare was supposed to be all about. The flavour was well captured by Derek Pearcy, a Reuters-Australia correspondent, in describing a RCR patrol setting out at 6 am after a night of hectic preparations:

 *Keyed up with training and waiting behind the lines, they started out carefully…*

*Their small arms were at the ready, their eyes alert for the slightest movement ahead of them.*

*The first shot rang out. The infantrymen ducked for cover, fanned out, and opened fire at a hill on their flank.*

*There was a short silence then a rattle of Sten guns, then silence again.*

*The Canadians emerged cautiously from shelter and closed in warily on a camouflaged dugout… A young Canadian looked intently into the dugout, laughed a little, then waved the others on.*

*By mid-afternoon the Canadians were under heavy harassing fire… From the gnarled mountain on their left came the continuous crack of small-arms fire…*

*The infantrymen crossed a field to scale the mountainside from the north. Chinese entrenched on the razor-backed ridge opened up a wild barrage of machine-gun, rifle and mortar fire and the Canadians climbed up, jumping out from behind rocks and trees. For an hour the valley resounded to the crack of rifles, the crash of grenades and the thump of tank guns and mortars.*

*Allied fighters added to the din and they wheeled and dove to rocket and drop napalm on the Chinese.*

This was the last dispatch Pearcy ever wrote; he was killed the next day. It was an endless, frustrating type of warfare, but it had moments of high heroism.

[…]

The hard slog on the UN forces back to the 38th parallel provided proof to Western leaders – if any still needed – that China’s full participation in the war had ended any possibility that Korea could be unified by force without launching a third world war. On June 1951, Trygve Lie signaled as much to the Communists in a speech delivered in Ottawa. He proclaimed that UN objectives would be met if a ceasefire could be arranged and the “peace and security of the area” could be restored. Several weeks later the USSR’s delegate to the UN agreed to ceasefire negotiations.”

p. 158 “Patrolling became a specialized craft. There were standing patrols – probes sent into no man’s land to set up listening posts or night ambushes. […] Every now and then one side would attempt to improve its strategic position by capturing this vantage point of that river crossing. Guns would crash, tracers would light up the night sky, jets would spread napalm over the hilltops, and men would die. Much of the time, though, the men killed time in their bunkers, listening to word of progress of the peace talks and thinking of the people at home who were living normal lives.

For this war was very different from the one the nation had experienced just a few years before. Then the effort had been all out: those who were not fighting were working in war plants, collecting scrap metal or rubber, or buying war bonds. There had been rationing and rallies and radio plays exhorting Canadians to greater efforts in supporting the war, and few families had not had at one member in uniform.

But not now. Most Canadians were getting on with their lives, almost oblivious of the fighting and killing taking place in the hills of Korea. The nation was prosperous and united as the post-war boom continued. There was no rationing; there were not even restrictions on credit or foreign exchange. A good time was being had by all – with the exception of the seven to eight thousand in Korea.

It was not long before a deep cynicism began to mark the thoughts of men all along the UN lines. Why were they there? What were they fighting for? The mixture of frustration and resentment was dangerous, and the officers tried to dispel it by ordering constant patrolling, some which was useless and just wasted lives, or by more comical expedients, such as firing red, white, and blue smoke-shells at the Chinese positions on Queen Elizabeth’s coronation day.

It was that mix of boredom and mischief that provoked Lieutenant Peter Worthington into a prank that landed him in serious trouble. One morning while the PPCLI was in reserve, US planes accidentally bombed a bridge over the Imjin River that was held by the UN troops. Worthington, who was already displaying his journalistic skills as editor of the battalion newsletter, decided to write about the attack:

*It was newsletter time, so I included a sarcastic item to the effect that “Four unidentified US planes with UN markings bombed and strafed the Teal bridge, but fortunately no soldiers were killed, only 11 Americans.”*

Canadian Press corresponded Bill Boss reported the item and it didn’t take long for Worthington to be called on the carpet:

*I took a jeep to Seoul, apologized to some bored American brigadier general who didn’t know what it was all about, didn’t care, and, I left, had only just learned by my presence that there were Canadians in Korea.*”

p. 170 “ Through the spring and summer of 1952, life on the line continued in a semi-permanent routine. The men on both sides lived in their bunkers and foxholes for much of the times, trying to stay alive during the intermittent shelling, and when not underground they manned listening posts or forward observation outposts.

On the night of May 31st, 1952, Corporal Arthur Irvine Stinson became a here. Stinson was one of 22 men, under the command of Lieutenant A.A.S Peterson, sent out to raid a Chinese position and take prisoners. The raiding party formed up in the RCR trenches in the late afternoon and watched as USAF fighter-bombers strafed and rocketed the Chinese across the valley. As the sun set, the patrol moved out through a gap in the wire. At double time the men jogged along a path through their own minefield and within minutes they were at the foot of Hill 113. There was a cluster of ruined farmhouses at the foot of the hill, and Peterson halted his men there and called for artillery and tank fire on the Chinese positions above. Then the men started to climb.

The first line of trenches was empty and so was the second. Peterson placed Stinson in charge of a small party of five and left them to clear the second position while he and the remainder of the patrol continued up to the top of the hill. Stinson’s group worked their way around to the left, carefully examining the bunkers connected to the trench, and found one Chinese soldier hiding in the dugout. As they were starting to secure their prisoner, the hillside above and below them came alive with rifle and machine-gun fire. Four of Stinson’s party were hit almost immediately, including the man guarding the prisoner, who tried to scramble away and was shot dead. As the firing continued, Stinson searched the body and discovered some papers identifying the Chinese unit. Then he too was hit. Meanwhile, knowing that a hand-to-hand fight so far from his own lines would bring total disaster, Peterson had ordered his men to dash straight down the hill. The wounded Stinson stayed long enough to cover the desperate withdrawal of his section, killing 3 Chinese in the process. Major-General Cassells called this patrol “a specially daring raid”, but it was a clear failure. Had it not been for Peterson and Stinson – both of whom were decorated for their part in the action – Canadian lives would surely have been lost.”

p. 177 “ One of the Canadian prisoners, Private John Junkins, was released shortly after the battle. A member of the first patrol, he had been lost from the main party when McNeil led it back toward the Canadian positions, and had taken refuge in an unoccupied Canadian bunker. He later related the strange events:

*I lost the main party. Shells and mortars were bursting all around and I was pinned down. I crawled into a bunker and after a time I heard Chinese voices outside. I … flattened myself against the wall… Someone suddenly ripped away the poncho waterproof cape covering the doorway and sprayed the back of the bunker with a burp gun.*

*I lay there for 15 minutes. 2 Chinese eventually came into the bunker, pulled me out and told me I was a prisoner.*

After searching him, the Chinese brought up three more prisoners, arranged them in a single file, and began to move them off. For some reason they decided to leave Junkins behind. A Chinese medical orderly gave him a drink of water, stuffed some papers into his uniform – probably propaganda leaflets – and departed with the rest of the patrol, and Junkins crawled back into the bunker and waited for the Canadians to reoccupy the position.

The limited prisoner exchange which had taken place in April and early May paved the way for a ceasefire. On June 7 an agreement was reached at Panmunjom for the rest of the POW to handled along the lines originally suggested by the Indian delegation to the UN, and India was selected as the country to decide the disposition of the prisoners […]

The shooting stopped the night of July 27, 1953. The total Canadian toll was 1,550 battle casualties – 312 servicemen killed in action, dead of wounds, or missing and officially presumed dead; 1,202 wounded, 33 prisoners of war (none of whom died) – and 94 dead from non-battle causes.”

The authors of this book clearly privilege the individual stories of the events on the ground as opposed to the bird’s view narration of “big” milestones of the War. It seems that this choice betrays the belief that there are no “big” milestones that may be described separately from the narration of the sweat and blood, which made everything else possible.

The Age of Peacekeeping

p.188. “The Korean War had been an example, not of peacekeeping, but of collective security. There is a world of difference between the two. The chief object of peacekeeping is to keep two potential combatants separated while diplomatic efforts are mounted to resolve their conflict; the aim of collective security is to stop an aggressor, by force if necessary.

There were no instances of U.N.- sponsored collective security from 1953 to 1990. As long as the Cold War divided the Great Powers into two armed camps, each jockeying to expand its theatre of influence and each deeply suspicious of the other’s every move, there could not be enough agreement or trust to allow a collective security action. But peacekeeping was possible, at least in those instances where the Great Powers were not directly involved.

Canada’s first forays into U.N. peacekeeping had come before the Korean War. A few Canadian officers had served as observers along the borders between India and Pakistan, in Jammu and Kashmir, in the bloody years after those two states became independent of Britain in 1948, in the operation known as the U.N. Military Observer Group India-Pakistan. The presence of the U.N. didn’t bring any lasting peace – more than four decades later, hostilities and bloodshed still erupt from time to time – yet the presence of impartial observers has lessened the violence, and has likely saved many lives.”

ISRAELI – ARAB CRISIS

p.190 “The conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the persistent tension between Israelis and Palestinians, have created an equally intractable situation – and a potential conflict between the Great Powers, who, in varying degrees at different points, have supported their client states. During the First World War the British had gained control of Plestine and had promised to create a Jewish national state, but by 1947 Britain was looking for a way out of Palestine, and although the U.N. tried to establish an administration that could take over, its efforts were fruitless. Fighting between Jews and Arabs began after the U.N. passed a resolution calling for the partition of Palestine; after Israel proclaimed its independence in 1948, hostilities intensified. Subsequently, Israel signed armistice agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, and to monitor these agreements the Security Council set up the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) with 50 officers. But there were far more incidents than there were UNTSO officers to investigate them, and by 1953 tension on the Arab-Israeli borders had increased as guerrilla attacks inevitably produced retaliatory strikes. A spiral of escalating violence had begun.

The answer was to increase UNTSO’s strenghth, and at this point Canada became involved. 4 army officers were seconded to the Department of External Affairs for a one-year tour of duty in February 1954, and several months later Canada agreed that General E.L.M Burns, who had commanded the 5th Canadian Armoured Division and I Canadian Corps in Italy during the 2nd World War and had subsequently become deputy minister of Veterans Affairs, could become chief of staff of UNTSO.

Born in 1897, Burns had attended the Royal Military College and had served overseas during the Great War with distinction. He had stayed in the army between the wars, earning a reputation as an officer with an uncommonly good mind. Able though he was, he was a stiff man, and no inspiring commander; while his staff respected him, he won little affection. Nor was he much admired by the Israelis or the Arabs. For one thing, he set out to learn Arabic but not Hebrew. His reason? The Israelis could communicate with him in English, French, or German, but the Arab officers, for the most part, spoke no other language. There was practicality there, but perhaps a lack of sensitivity.”

p. 191 “In fairness, however, Burns’ work was a task of almost unrelieved frustration. As he wrote later, the armistice agreements “contained certain vague statements and compromises, essential to secure the signature of both sides, given the circumstances of 1949. It was hoped then that the difficult points would be settled in peace negotiations after a relatively short period…” But there were no negotiations – and there would be none until after three more wars – and instead “there were disputes about the interpretation of the armistice agreements… And the while, both sides violated or failed to observe the agreements, in more or less serious ways.” Burns tried to be impartial, but “before I had been long in the Middle East, I learned that no matter how hard on tried to be objective and impartial, if one accepted the views of one side on any matter, the other side one of partiality.”

In the hornets’ nest of suspicion, Burns and his UNTSO officers were caught in the middle, desperately trying to keep peace amid the shooting. In August 1955, for example, the Egyptians accepted UNTSO’s requests for a ceasefire and agreed to halt fedayeen raids launched by Palestinians dispossessed of their homes by the Israelis. But the fedayeen guerrillas carried no radios and could not be reached once they had crossed into Israel, and so the raids went on. In revenge, the Israelis sent an armoured unit into the Gaza Strip, destroyed a police station and a hospital under construction, and fired indiscriminately into a village. “I had the feeling I trying to stop a runaway truck on a steep hill by throwing stones under the wheels,” Burns said. The Egyptians said 36 had been killed and 13 wounded; the Israelis claimed they had hit the police station because that was the point from which the raids had been launched. All-out war was averted, but only barely.

Despite complaints from both sides, Burns’ impartiality was impeccable. Whether that was true of all his officers was another question. Canadian diplomats were told repeatedly that UNTSO officers in the Middle East pro-Israeli but invariably departed pro-Arab. It was also said that officers and U.N. officials “spoke in openly critical terms of Israel”. As for Burns, when he wrote his book *Between Arab and Israeli* he took pains to point out in his preface that is was possible to oppose Israeli policy without being anti-Semitic.

p.192. “Normally each officer spent half his one-year term on the Israel-Syria MAC and half on the Israel-Jordan MAC. Observers lived in fixed observation posts for four or five days and then had a day off; much of their time was spent conducting investigations or monitoring radio transmissions. As is often the case with military service, there was discomfort of a high order. One Canadian, returning to his quarters after being pinned down in his observation post by mortar fire, took his boots off and was promptly bitten by a poisonous snake.

By 1958, after the 1956 was between Israel and Egypt had screwed tensions higher still, there were 14 Canadians, the largest national contingent in UNTSO, which included Swedish, American, Norwegian, French, Danish, Australian, Belgian, and Dutch officers. The next year, the number was increased to 17.

Their work often put UNTSO team members in peril. 2 Canadian officers were injured in a mine explosion in 1956, and one of those officers, Leutenant-Colonel George Flint, was killed by Jordanian fire 2 years later. The U.N. report said Flint had gone to the Israeli sector under a white flag in response to a complaint that the Israelis were firing at a Jordanian village. He died from a single shot fire by a Jordanian sniper.

UNTSO’s worth is difficult to appraise. It could not prevent the Suez crisis of 1956, nor could it move the parties towards peace talks. The Israelis often complained that the observers didn’t stop incidents or protect Israeli citizens; moreover, they claimed, UNTSO’s very existence inhibited progress towards a permanent settlement. But UNTSO did provide a medium that led the Israelis and Arabs talk to each other and reach local cease-fires. Useful or not, UNTSO continues to this day, and Canadians continue to serve in it.”

SUEZ CRISIS

The Suez crisis began in Cairo, Paris, and London. The 160-kilometre Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and is critical for Europe’s oil supplies, was owned by Britain and France. When Egypt’s President Gamal Abdal Nasser nationalized the canal in July 1956 there was outrage in London, the French, fighting against rebellious Algerians, similarly feared the new Arab militancy, and the leaders of the 2 nations began planning a joint military strike that would topple Nasser and put them in occupation of the canal.

p.193. “ During the last week in October, while the US was in the final days of a presidential election campaign and the attention of the world was fixed on the anti-Communist revolt in Hungary, Israel began to mobilize its armed forces. On October 29th the Israelis sent their armour into the Sinai desert, an action that was greeted, according to plan, by a joint British-French ultimatum to Cairo and Jerusalem for “the early cessation of hostilities to safeguard the free passage of the Canal”. Israel instantly agreed to halt its armoured spearheads 16 km east of the Canal, but Egypt, ordered to halt its troops and to accept temporary occupation of Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez, naturally refused. With that as justification – exactly as planned – Britain and France began air and sea operations. The Egyptian air force was eliminated quickly, while, in the Sinai, the Israelis routed Nasser’s army.

Ottawa’s response to the attacks on Egypt was one of shock. In public the government was moderate, merely expressing “regret” that Britain and France “felt it necessary to intervene with force on their own responsibility”. But in private the line was much tougher.

p. 194 “ But what could be done? The Cabinet discussed the idea of a U.N. police force for Suez, and when foreign minister Lester Pearson left for New York on November 1 he took with him the idea of transforming the Anglo-French invaders into such a force. But the temper of the General Assembly made this out of the question. In the early hours of November 2, the assembly passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops.

Canada abstained on the resolution, and when Pearson took the podium to explain his country’s vote he advanced the idea that was to win him the Nobel Peace Prize – the idea of a large U.N. army made up of national contingents. This was very different from the original post-war plan for a cadre of U.N. generals deploying international armies, which had proved unworkable.

p. 196 “ How would troops get to the Middle East? What would they eat and how would food reach them? How could they communicate with New York and their home countries? What facilities were needed for transport, for supply, for maintenance? Could the US be asked to assist in getting UNEF under way? No one had answers, but the Canadians stood out because of their experience: they were accustomed to sending troops abroad, they had unusually balanced forces, and they were scrupulous in their administration and staff work. Thus they were taken seriously when they suggested and UNEF should be a buffer force, large enough to be noticed but not one that could intervene militarily; that the U.S. should be asked to help with stores from its large stockpiles in the area; that the headquarters and support units for all contingents should be consolidated and should function in English.

p. 197 “As soon as the Canadians arrived, General Burns asked them to take hold of the UNEF rear area. This was a hard task for they were housed in squalid huts, slapped under a curfew, and obliged to adhere to a blackout. As one private put it: “I thought we was here to clear the Egyptians out the Canal Zone. Instead damned if they aren’t treating us like prisoners of war.” Still, they did their prosaic but essential jobs well, and by the next month Burns was asking for more of them. Once British and French withdrawal had been completed and a demarcation line between Israeli and Egyptian forces had been defined, UNEF problems were administrative, and no other remotely acceptable country would be found to tackle them.

p.198 “Despite all the difficulties of heat, disease, and boredom, their one-year tour of UNEF duty was an education for the Canadians. There was a generalized contempt for the bribery and corruption endemic among Egyptian officialdom, but there was also sympathy for the civilians caught in this territorial impasse. In a personal letter in 1962, a lieutenant with the recce squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons would observe of the Israelis:

*There is only one kibbutz available for general study. The leaders are pleasant to talk with, polite and half apologetic about their younger members who on the whole are inclined to be a bit arrogant and know it all. I think this is probably because they have not had to do any fighting but would like to prove that they are just as good as their elders. Unfortunately because of the rules it is impossible to have a good bull session. I have the impression that they have a feeling that the 1956 war was a little too easy and they are wondering what would have happened if it had been a little tougher. Still, they are willing to do it again and they will go all out because they can’t afford to lose.*

*The Palestinian Arab who lives in the Gaza strip is between the Devil and the deep blue Med. Jimmy Nasser is pushing on one side and Israel stands on the other waiting to kick him in the teeth at the first sign of hostility. They are an unsettled group who are afraid Jimmy will use them for shock troops if he goes after Israel and right now there is no hope of smashing Israel and taking back the land they believe is theirs.*

CYPRUS

p.222 “ While some U.N. operations have a defined lifespan, others seem fated to go on for ever. That is certainly the case in Cyprus. The small Mediterranean island has a population of some 700,000 with a large Greek majority and a substantial Turkish minority of about 20%. Cyprus became independent from Great Britain in 1959 after a long guerrilla struggle by Greek islanders. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guarantee, Britain, Greece, and Turkey recognized and guaranteed Cyprus’ security; each power, however, had the right of unilateral action to restore the conditions established at the time of independence. Moreover, Greece and Turkey were to station troops on the island, while Britain would retain large areas as sovereign bases.

This delicately balanced constitution needed only the lightest of pushes to send the whole structure toppling to the ground. In 1963 President Makarios, a Greek Orthodox archbishop and one of the major leaders of the guerrilla war, proposed constitutional revisions that appeared to threaten the Turks. Riots resulted, the U.N. Security Council failed to act, and a conference called by London produced no results. Britain then called on a number of NATO countries to contribute troops – something that might have been thought appropriate as both Greece and Turkey were members of the alliance – but Makarios objected; he would accept an international peacekeeping force, but it should be under U.N. control.

p. 223 “ Pearson’s pledge may have been spurred by Turkey’s threat the day before to intervene if attacks against Turkish Cypriots continued. Greece responded by promising resistance, and suddenly the entire NATO position in southern Europe was jeopardized by the prospect of a war between the 2 countries. At this point Paul Martin, Secretary of State for External Affairs, stepped in. Working the telephones as only he could, Martin talked to the Nordic countries and wrung a promise of troops out of Sweden as well, and told U Thant that the force was a reality. That night Parliament approved the commitment of a battalion of the Royal 22e Régiment, the country’s designated standby unit, and the armoured reconnaissance squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons. The hope was that the commitment might be for 3 months only.

The first Canadians of the advance party landed at Nicosia on March 15th, followed 2 days later by infantry of the Van Doos. Their prompt arrival forestalled any Turkish invasion. The rest of the infantry, airlifted by RCAF Transport Command, arrived in a few days, and the aircraft carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*, carrying the RCD’s scout cars and other vehicles, drivers, and supplies, pulled up to the dock on March 30. On April 14, Ottawa decided to supply a brigade headquarters of some 150 officers and men, and Canada’s contribution reached 1,150.

By this time Finland, Denmark, and Ireland had promised infantry units. By June all the national contingents had arrived and UNFICYP had its full strength of 6,500, collectively known on the island as “Blue Berets”.

The Canadians, being first on the scene despite their foot-dragging, got the hot spots to patrol. The force commander, General P.S. Gyani of India, said that Canadians could “create a more favourable atmosphere in the Nicosia area which is considered to be the most sensitive”. As a result the Van Doos had the teak of patrolling the Green Line, a buffer zone established by the British and so named because the senior officer involved had drawn a line on a map with a green pencil, dividing Greeks and Turks in Nicosia’s crowded streets as well as the road between Kyrenia and Nicosia. After shots were fired at the troops, Makarios agreed that the Green Line should become a cleared and neutral zone and the Van Doos moved into empty homes, stores, and factories, physically interposing themselves between the fractious islanders. The policy to be followed was diplomatic toughness, as UNFICYP tried to establish its moral authority. That was not easy. As Brigadier Norman Wilson-Smith, commander of Nicosia Zone, wrote in 1965, UNFICYP had no authority to arbitrate a local quarrel or to make or enforce a decision. P. 224 Force could not be used to intimidate or punish, but only as a last resort. When infantry came under fire from both sides near Kyrenia in mid-April, for example, the company commander told his machine-gunners to fire 60 rounds in the general direction of the Turks. By August the Department of National Defence had decided to send powerful 106 mm recoilless rifles; this was not a place where Canadians troops could afford to be outgunned.

The position was delicate, and not unlike that of a policeman called to break up a domestic dispute: the constable’s first task is to separate the combatants, but then, all too often, both man and wife turn on the cop. In Cyprus, diplomacy and negotiating skills would be demanded of corporals and colonels alike. […]

By 1969 the force’s strength had been reduced by half, and Ottawa withdrew 2 infantry companies and the reconnaissance squadron, leaving about 480 officers and men. But there was still no resolution of the basic issues. In July 1974 the “colonels’ government” in Greece attempted to bring about enosis, or union with Cyprus, and provoked a coup the overthrew Makarios and installed a former guerilla gunman as president. The Turks, nearer to Cyprus than the Greeks and with highly efficient military forces, responded by sending 40,000 troops in by sea and air, effectively seizing control of almost half of Cyprus. Some 200,000 Turkish and Greek Cypriots were displaced, each communal group fleeing to the safety of its enclave. The Turkish invasion led to the fall of the Greek government and to new difficulties for UNFICYP. There was no help from New York; the force commander was told, in effect, to do the best he could. […]

The Canadian peacekeepers, by this time paratroopers of the Airborne Regiment, came under fire, took some casualties, and dug themselves in. The contingent commander, Colonel C.E. Beattie, found himself trying to rescue women and children held hostage and preserve Nicosia airport as a neutral zone. Beattie was highly praised for his leadership and the concern he showed for both troops and civilians, and was made a commander of Canada’s new Order of Military Merit.

Beattie’s efforts were matched by other officers who managed to keep the Ledra Palace Holel, Canadian headquarters in downtown Nicosia, as U.N. territory. What had been a comfortable billet had suddenly become a hotbed of danger. A Canadian officer trying escort stranded Turkish Cypriots back to their lines came under fire and was seriously wounded. When one of his men tried to give him first aid, he too was shot. Attempts to rescue the pair met with more fire, and the Canadians had to knock out a Greek Cypriot machine-gun post to free their men. After arranging for covering fire, Captain Alain Forand crawled out to the two, single-handedly dragged the more seriously wounded to cover, and then directed the rescue of the second. His bravery won him the Star of Courage. But two other Canadians were later killed and 17 were wounded.

p.226 As of 1990, 27 Canadians had died in UNFICYP, most in accidents. […]

The Cyprus crisis has demonstrated that Pearson was correct in the conditions he tried for in 1964: a mediator was needed and peacemaking had to be part of the process. Unfortunately nothing came of those points, and Canada has been trapped in UNFICYP for than 25 years. Undoubtedly, the U.N. has stopped the constant sniping from escalating into open war; undoubtedly it is good field training for the soldiers. The difficulty is that some senior NCOs have done 6 months stints six or seven times, or more. Virtually every regular-force soldier from armour, artillery, and infantry had served in Cyprus, and as manpower began to pinch in the Canadian forces in the late 1980s, reservists were used to flesh out the units. As Brigadier Wilson-Smith said a quarter-century ago: “Peacekeeping is no job for a soldier, but a job that only a soldier can do.”

*It seems that the intellectual introspecting policy-making narrative is not keeping pace with the constantly and fast changing realities that demand involvement of the Canadian forces. Pearson’s brilliant ideas that led to the establishment of the U.N. peacekeeping force were soon outdone by the tide-wave of new complex processes that his ideas were unable to account for. The soldiers on the front lines, caught in the cross-fire, undergunned, outmanned are the ones bearing the brunt of political shortcomings. Testimonies, first-hand accounts of daily depravation, pain and heroism, are the means for the public to be informed about what is done and not done on its behalf.*

The IRAN-IRAQ WAR

p.227.“ By now the Cyprus deadlock ought to have put paid to the whole idea of U.N. peacekeeping. That it hasn’t suggests that there is still a role for the honest broker, someone who can step between warring factions and provide a face-saving way for them to back off.

In 1974 a Canadian logistical unit was asked to join the U.N. Disengagement Force (UNDOF) along the Israeli-Syrian border, to help supervise the ceasefire and deployment of troops after the Yom Kippur War and to maintain an “Area of Separation” between the 2 armies. The Canadians are still there, maintaining vehicles and all kinds of electrical and electronic gear and providing supply and communications links. The posting remains a difficult one; the sweltering summers bring out poisonous snakes and spiders, whereas the winter snows are so deep that the Canadian mess hall once collapsed under them. But UNDOF is regarded as a highly successful peacekeeping operation.

In August 1988 the Security Council authorized the formation of the U.N. Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG). Iran and Iraq had been engaged in a massive war of extraordinary ferocity since 1980 and both were near exhaustion. The U.N. had been trying for some time to get the resolution of the Security Council in 1987 was initially rejected by Iran, but in July 1988 Tehran indicated that it was prepared to reconsider. A technical mission visited the was zone and it was determined that the force size should be 350 observers with communications and logistics support. After long negotiations in New York, Canada agreed to provide 15 observers and a 525-man signal and support unit until such time as the U.N. could recruit and train signalers and purchase the necessary equipment for them. The first Canadian troops arrived in mid-August.

UNIIMOG was to be divided in two, headquartered in Tehran and Baghdad, with approximately 160 observers on each side on the ceasefire line.

p.228. Each detachment of observers was to be supported by 88 Canadian Signal Squadron with its 170 vehicles and radios. The Iraqis were quick to make arrangements for the UNIIMOG deployment, but Tehran was balky in a number of ways. The Canadians insisted their troops carry personal weapons, something that upset the Iranians. Communications in the Iranian forward zones were limited, yet Tehran insisted on 48-hour notice of all flights – likely because USAF C5 Galaxies had to be used to transport some of signal equipment. There was a residue of tension left from 1979, when the Canadians had harboured and then spirited away American embassy officers hiding in fear for their lives after the U.S embassy had been seized by revolutionary militants.

There were more difficulties than usual in the operation. The obsolete radios the signalers had brought with them proved ineffective in the mountainous terrain along the ceasefire line. The radio vans had no air conditioning, a critical factor in the 45C heat of Iran and Iraq. Maps were in short supply. And suspicion between the two sides had not been eased by the ceasefire. The U.N. was not seen as impartial by anyone, and there were serious fears for the safety of its troops.

Even without all that, life would have been unpleasant. The accommodations, fetid barracks or tents, were unsatisfactory. There was too much work for too few hours. “There is no entertainment,” one officer wrote in an article published in a military journal, “except for the singing of the Koran from towers throughout the city. The troops can’t even leave the compound to take a walk. And more culture shock – no local pub, and drinking is forbidden.” The Iranian liaison officer whispered that even card games should not be played where they might be seen – “It is against the law to play cards in this country” – nor could the soldiers wear short-sleeved shirts: “It may offend the local women.” For some of the Canadians, the officer said, “It’s a bit like being in prison – working, eating, sleeping and no freedom to come and go…”

On the Iraqi side of the line, things went much better – in 1988 Iraq was seen as far more pro-Western than the fundamentalist Iranians. The troops had arrived expecting the worst. “On the aircraft,” one officer remembered, “everybody had a plasma bottle on one leg, nuclear biological chemical warfare kits, flak jackets and weapons.” The reality was very different. Accommodations in Baghdad were first class and the food was good. Water was readily available and the 16-hour days, while exhausting, could be compensated for with occasional restaurant meals. The signalers and support troops in Iraq had drawn the long straw. As for the others, the U.N. managed to set up its signals net fairly quickly, and all the Canadians, except for some 15 observers who remained through 1990, returned home without mishap before Christmas of 1988.

NAMIBIA AND CENTRAL AMERICA

p.229. “At the end of the 1980s, an unusual Canadian force served in Namibia, the former South West Africa. Although the UN had officially terminated South Africa’s control over the region in 1966, and the International Court of Justice had supported the resolution in 1971 and ordered South Africa out, South Africa had for years refused to give up control. In January 1989 free elections were finally being planned and the U.N. began establishing its Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG). UNTAG would combine police, military observers, and infantry to supervise South Africa’s withdrawal from its war against the guerrillas of the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO), and to oversee elections. There were the usual difficulties in finances, and serious problems in deploying the UNTAG forces – circumstances that led to repeated breaches in the ceasefire and to South African demands for UNTAG to leave within days of its arrival. By November, however, South Africa was stable enough for elections to be held.

Much of the work would come down to supervision of the local police, and so UNTAG included police contingents from 24 countries. Among them were a hundred RCMPs – selected from 2000 volunteers – who were dispatched in October. The Mounties, as Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark told the U.N., had helped to “establish by their presence the rule of law in the Canadian west. They brought order, not force, and by their conduct, established a respect that endures to this day…”

Very quickly, the RCMP had the same impact in Namibia. Wearing khaki cotton army uniforms (their own woolen uniforms would have harboured parasites) and blue berets, the Mounties accompanied local police, staffed polling stations, and helped the elections take place with surprising peace. One sergeant spent 7 nights guarding ballots in the country jail – the safest spot in town – and when another spent a night in a thatched hut he was advised to ignore the lizards crawling through his uniform, as they would conveniently eat the insects out of it! The U.N. was more than pleased with the Mounties: “In their first week,” one official said, “they did more organizational and public relations work in the communities – both black and white – than police from other countries did in six months. They are clearly professionals.” But accompanying South West African Police on the job and recording complaints against them was a delicate task. One constable who had come fresh from drug duties in St. John’s reflected that “I really don’t know if I’d like having a policeman from another country following me around while I am doing my job. But we’ve established a good rapport.”

Thanks to that rapport, the Mounties’ first operations outside Canada ended with substantial dispatch. The elections were deemed democratic and certified “free and fair” by the U.N., with SWAPO the winner; South Africa withdrew completely; and UNTAG wound up on schedule.

p.230. Even as Namibia was entering a new era, so too was Central America. The Sandinista government in Nicaragua, like Castro’s Cuba before it, was seen by the US and its client states in the region as a focus of subversion. Certainly there were guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Honduras aiming to topple the pro-American governments. At the same time the Americans were sponsoring the Contras, a guerrilla force that threatened the Sandinistas. Prolonged efforts, strongly supported by Ottawa, by the Contadora group of 4 Central and South American nations to start a peace process had foundered – even though a peace treaty had been negotiated and signed in August 1987 – thanks to Washington’s hostility. Then, in March 1989, the presidents of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica asked the U.N. to establish a peacekeeping force in the region.

In mid-October, U.N. Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar produced plans for ONUCA, the Spanish acronym for the U.N. Observer Group in Central America. Initial plans called for a 6-month mandate and looked to participation from Canada, West Germany, Spain, Colombia, Ireland, and Venezuela. ONUCA was to be an observer group with logistical and air support to a total strength of 625, and its primary task would be to monitor Nicaragua’s borders with Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The Canadian contribution was expected to be some 40 officer observers and 100 air and ground crew to service 8 helicopters. But the Canadian government’s position was that Canada would only participate if a ceasefire was in place from the outset.

With that condition fulfilled, an advance team of nine left Canada on December 3 for Honduras under Brigadier-General Ian Douglas, par of an 80-member advance party. Douglas was second-in-command of the whole force, and he was not noticeably sanguine about ONUCA’s prospects; he told the press that it might last as long as the Cyprus operation. By the beginning of February there were 22 Canadians with ONUCA, a fifth of its strength, and the 33 observer posts had still not all been sited. One pilot told the press that this was the most challenging of all peacekeeping operations: “It’s exciting, meeting with the Contras one day, going to see the Sandinistas the next day to try to get things arranged.”

The prospects for peace improved mightily on February 25, 1990 when the Sandinista government was driven from power in a stunning election defeat. The new government persuaded the Contras to lay down their arms and began to take control of the Sandinista army. The U.N. observers turned their attention to disarming the Contras and by June, with that delicate task largely completed, ONUCA staged its “demobilization” ceremony and went home.

THE WAR IN THE GULF

p.243. “ The fragility of order- both foreign and domestic – became all too clear to Canadians in August 1990. No sooner had the Oka incident demonstrated that Canada had no magical immunity to armed violence, when the Iraqi invasion on Kuwait brough the prospect of war home with startling force. The Cold War might have come to an end, but the prospects of peace really were illusory.

When President Saddam Hussein’s huge army occupied the tiny emirate of Kuwait at the beginning of August, the world was unaccountably shocked. Saddam had invaded Iran in 1980, and in the vicious war that followed the Iraqis used chemical and nerve gases against Iranian troops in the field and against rebellious Kurdish villagers in Iraq. Saddam, in other words, was an especially ruthless tyrant. Now he had control of the immense oil reserves of Kuwait, while his tanks were poised on the border of Saudi Arabia, the source of much of the West’s oil. Would he stop? […]

When asked by President Bush if Canada could contribute to the international force, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney promptly replied that it could. On August 10, just a week after the Iraqi invasion, Mulroney declared that Iraq had “flagrantly violated international law and offended against the most basic human values everywhere”. Canada’s expertise and reputation were based on its peacekeeping role, he said, but that “does not remove from us the responsibility” to respond to attacks and threats against Canada’s friends and allies. The country “must do everything it can” to restore Iraqi respect for international law. To that end the Prime Minister ordered 2 destroyers, HMCS *Terra Nova* and *Athabaskan*, and a supply ship, HMCS *Protecteur*, to the Persial Gulf.

In Iraq, Saddam’s government quickly seized resident foreigners as hostages, while in Kuwait the embassies, including Canada’s, were ordered shut. But despite Iraq’s aggression and these violations of international law, in Canada there was immediate and almost reflexive criticism of the government’s action […] As a writer in the *Globe and Mail* put it, becoming involved “in an adventure that has nothing to do with respect for international law, but everything to do with U.S. interests and domestic politics…” In other words, by supporting the U.S. in its “gunboat diplomacy” in the Gulf, Canada might jeopardize its hard-won status as the preeminent supporter of United Nations peacekeeping. A Security Council decision on August 25 to slap economic sanctions on Iraq and to allow a limited use of force to maintain the blockade eased that concern somewhat. And as an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* also pointed out, “failing to defend our interests” – meaning the national interests of preserving peace and deterring aggression – “ would be the gravest folly”.

p.244 The true folly of the affair could not escape notice. The 3 navy ships ordered to the Gluf were rust-buckets ranging in age from 18 to 31 years. As the Iraqi forces had modern missiles and the 3 warships lacked anti-missile defences of any kind, ships under constructions or in refit had to be cannibalized to fit them for possible action. One gun was actually removed from a museum display to be fitted on one of the ships. As a Toronto Star columnist said, “the fact that they were already supposed to be warships is beside the point, I guess.” For humiliating 2 weeks the country watched while the ships were readied for service, and when the trio began its long voyage to the Persian Gulf the navy made it clear that the length of the journey would conveniently allow time to train the officers and rating in how to use their new weaponry. None of this was the navy’s fault; the crews were highly skilled and professional. They had, however, been condemned to serve in a government-neglected force that had seen its equipment rust away and had seen news ships on order delayed again and again.

p.245 While the *Terra Nova*, *Protecteur*, and *Athabaskan* and their 934 sailors (27 of whom were women – the first time women had gone on active service with the navy) made their way to the Gulf, the tension continued to mount. At the end of August, Saddam Hussein relented and agreed to allow his women and children hostages to leave Iraq and Kuwait; the men would remain as “guests”. On September 14, with no end to the crisis in sight, Canada increased its commitment. The Prime Minister announced that a squadron of 18 twin-jet CF-18 fighters, capable of speeds of 2000 kph and of filling either an attack or an interceptor role, would proceed to the Gulf from Canada’s NATO bases at Baden at Lahr, Germany. The aircraft, armed with 20mm guns and Sidewinder and Sparrow missiles, were to provide cover for the Canadian ships as they patrolled their assigned areas in the middle of the Persian Gulf, some 500 km from Iraq. The deployment would put another 450 pilots and groundcrew, men and women, into the Gulf. The squadron (increased to 24 aircraft in January 1991 to allow for normal maintenance and any losses) was to be located in Doha, Qatar, at hurriedly constructed bases dubbed “Canada Dry One” and “Canada Dry Two”; Canadian headquarters was located in Bahrain. Initially, ground protection came from a company of infantrymen from the Royal Canadian Regiment. The CF-18 squadron – the “Desert Cats” – became operational on October 8, and its capacities were soon enhanced by a Boeing 707 air-to-air refueling tanker.

On October1, just days after the Iraqi president promised the “the mother of all battles” if his conquest of Kuwait was challenged, HMCS Athabaskan began its blockade enforcement duties by stopping an Indian liner northbound for the Iraqi port Umm Qasr. “It was a friendly visit,” one officer said, “it’s standard operating procedure.” 6 additional vessels were challenged that day by radio or inspected by the ship’s Sea King helicopter, called “Hormuz Harry” by its crew of four. At the same time the Canadians, and notably their force commander, Commodore Kenneth Summers, were refining their command and control procedures with the dozen or more navies operating a giant hundred-ship fleet in the area – a task made easier by years of NATO exercises that had standardized procedures among NATO fleets and other Western powers. By Christmas the Canadian ships were patrolling an area stretching from Bahrain to the Straits of Hurmuz, and had boarded 20 vessels and made almost ¼ of inspections undertaken by the allied fleet.

p.246. the sailors, like all other troops in the Gulf, lived with the fear of chemical attack, for the Iraqis had Scud missiles that could be armed with nerve gases or other chemical agents. This meant that anti-gas drills, always a part of the Canadian Forces’ training, had to be treated seriously, and in the hot climate of the Gulf – 38 to 45C – that forced serious inconvenience on everyone. Nerve gas antidotes, consisting of atropine and a Canadian-developed substance called HI-6, were standard issue, but they might be dangerous for some users, and the Canadian Forces’ antidote took at least 17 seconds to mix and inject; too much time, said some. Moreover, the gas protection suite were cumbersome and claustrophobic at the best of times; in the terrible heat of the Middle East the difficulties of fighting in such equipment were severe indeed.

[…] In Ottawa, MPs hotly debated Canada’s role in the Gulf, with the Liberal and NDP speakers offering support for the country’s troops, while simultaneously urging that economic sanctions be given more time to work, and objecting to giving the government a blank cheque. “Canadians deserve to know clearly what Canada is being committed to, “ said NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin. As a non-permanent (2-year) member of the Security Council, Canada had more voice than usual at the U.N. The Multroney government backed the Security Council resolution in Parliament and carried its position by a vote of 111-82, and in New York Canada co-sponsored the U.S. resolution and voted for it.

[…] A week before the deadline of January 15, Mulroney indicated that if war broke out Canada was prepared to consider changing its forces’ role from a defensive to an offensive one. The Canadians in the Persian Gulf area, now numbering 1700, watched and waited as the clock ticked down.

p.247. The suspense ended on the night of January 16 when American, Saudi, British, and Kuwaiti aircraft struck targets in Iraq and Kuwait with “smart” bombs and conventional “iron” weapons. At the same time sea-launched cruise missiles, capable of astonishing accuracy, devastated Iraqi command and control centres. “Desert Shield” had become “Desert Storm”, and the cabinet in Ottawa authorized its forces to take a limited offensive role. That meant that CF-18s could conduct sweep and escort missions over war zones, while the naval vessels could accompany ships bombarding coastal targets. “It is with no satisfaction that we take up arms,” the prime minister said, “because war is always a tragedy. But the greater tragedy would have been for criminal aggression to go unchecked.” […] At the same time as it made public Canada’s changed role, the government announced that it would send the 100-bed 1st Canadian Field Hospital, based at Camp Petawawa, Ontario, to Saudi Arabia with some 130 medical personnel and 400 supporting troops. Two 16-member surgical crews duly flew to Saudi Arabia before the end of January.

[…] For the Canadian pilots flying over Kuwait and Iraq, the air war was at once exhilarating and terrifying. The Iraqi air force had been largely grounded in the opening hours of the war, so the threat was primarily from anti-aircraft defenses. Even so, a constant watch had to be kept for enemy fighters. “I didn’t see anything,” one pilot said of his first sortie. “I was too busy looking for enemy planes to notice anything else.” “Every time you fly,” another pilot said, “you think maybe today will be the day the Iraqis come up to meet you.” Weather permitting, the pilots flew up to 25 sorties a day – “about six times more than a normal squadron would fly” in peacetime, said Colonel Romeo Lalonde, the commander of the Canadian air Task Group. But Lalonde insisted that his pilots would not switched to a ground-attack role. “Absolutely not. We don’t have the munitions here and we don’t see any requirement for them.”

p.248. But on February 1 Ottawa again expanded the squadron’s role, declaring its mandate to be “ to engage and eliminate enemy aircraft”, a phraseology that included hot pursuit. That was not realistic, Lalonde argued. The Iraqi air force had “gone to ground. The bombers are not being opposed. If it is not yielding anything, why are we doing it?” The role was then changed once more, to stress air cover for the allied naval fleet, but on February 11 visiting Leieutenant-General Fred Sutherland, the head of the Canadian Forces’ Air Command, declared that the CF-18 pilots were eminently capable of playing a ground-attack role after only a brief retraining period.

Finally, on February 20, the Department of National Defence announced that the Desert Cats would take up a ground-attack role within 2 weeks. The CF-18s were to be fitted 225-kg bombs and cluster bombs to attack ground targets of all types, including armoured vehicles, supply lines, and troop concentrations. It was, Defence minister Bill McKnight said, “a logical evolution of our role in this conflict”, and Canada would join 8 other nations in playing this role in the air war. There were protests from Opposition parliamentarians, but by this pint public support for Canada’s role in the war had grown dramatically. When asked if they favoured their armed forces going to war against Iraq, 58 % of those polled said yes while only 38% said no. The kneejerk anti-Americanism that had characterized much of the criticism of the war had begun to subside. Across the country, tens of thousands attached yellow ribbons to car aerials, trees, or front doors as a sign of support for the troops, and in Toronto billboards delivered a simple message: “To the Canadian troops in theGulf we have two word to say: Thank You.”

By the third week of February the air war seemed to have run out of targets, and the only question remaining was when the attack on the ground would commence. Peace efforts aimed at securing Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait speeded up, and the U.N. was again the scene of feverish activity. The there was no success, and on February 24 the coalition’s powerful ground forces launched themselves into Iraq and Kuwait.

p.249. At the same time the CF-18s made their first ground-attack sorties, ahead of schedule. The Iraqi defences, supposedly well dug in and protected by oil-filled moats, wire, and mines, turned out to be virtually worthless, and the much-vaunted abilities of the Iraqi army melted in mass surrenders. “It’s not Desert Storm,” columnist Richard Gwyn of the *Toronto Star* wrote, “it’s Desert Slaughter.” The ground war lasted for just 100 hours, with a ceasefire and de facto Iraqi surrender at midnight on February 27.

The result of the war was unquestionably decisive. Kuwait was liberated, though the retreating Iraqis set hundreds of that tiny state’s oil wells afire, leaving a massive economic and environmental disaster in their wake. Allied troops occupied a large portion of southern Iraq, and civil was, destined to be crushed by the remnants of the Iraqi army, erupted almost at once in the rest of the country. Iraqi fatalities were believed to number at least a 100000 and almost as many troops had been captured. Coalition fatalities were under 200 in all; fortunately not a single Canadian was included in that number.

The hard task of trying to bring peace to the whole Middle East remained, but for Ottawa the job now was to pull its troops out. 50 left for Canada on March 2, and 8 CF-18s headed out 3 days later for their German bases, where they were met with a hero’s welcome. More would follow, including the field hospital’s surgeons, who, happily, had had little work to do. While most of the Canadians headed for home, the destroyer HMCS Huron sailed for Gulf water to continue to enforce U.N. sanctions and, as the Defence department said, to “contribute to the process of restoring peace and security in the region”. At the same time, 23 combat engineers flew into Kuwait from their base at Lahr to help locate and dispose of land mines and the awesome amount of military munitions either abandoned in the precipitous Iraqi retreat from Kuwait or dropped by Allied aircraft. “This is going be a nightmare,” one soldier said.

That was true enough, but at least the nightmare of a terrible war had ended. In the process, the Canadian Forces had played their small yet important role creditably. The U.N., despite charges that it had acted as little more than an American puppet, had perhaps found itself filling the collective-security role envisaged by its founders in 1945.

p.250 Moreover, those who argued that participation in the war would destroy Canada’s reputation as a peacekeeper soon had their position confounded. On April 14, External Affairs minister Joe Clark announced that the U.N. had asked the country to provide 300 soldiers to serve as part of a 1440-member U.N. Iraq Kuwait Observation Mission on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border for one year. What New York needed, Clark said, were engineers to help clear mines, and they would be provided by the 1st Engineers Regiment, based at Chilliwack, B.C. By May 1, the Canadians were setting up their camp near Kuwait City, readying themselves for their dangerous work.

In late April, as well, the secretary-general of the U.N. hinted that Ottawa would be called on to provide an infantry battalion some 800 strong for a projected peacekeeping force in the western Sahara. A long war between Polisario guerrillas and Morocco came to a close when the Security Council adopted a report calling for repatriation of refugees and a referendum; the peacekeepers would organize the refugee movement and patrol the desert. Canadian peacekeeping was alive and well.

THE WORTH OF PEACEKEEPING

Including the war against Iraq, almost 85000 Canadians have served on U.N. and other peacekeeping missions around the world, including virtually every operation that could be so designated. This is a proud record, and there is no doubt that peacekeeping has become one of the centrepieces of Canadian foreign policy. The government, except on 2 or 3 occasions, has welcomed the opportunity to play its part in preserving peace; even when it was reluctant, Ottawa ultimately acceded to U.N. requests.

For a country such as Canada, peacekeeping provides the opportunity to carve out an area of independent military expertise. And certainly it has been useful. Peacekeeping may have accomplished little towards long-range peace in Cyprus, the Indian subcontinent, or the Middle East, but it has helped the world pick up the pieces after wars, and it has aided in the search for an maintenance of ceasefires. The Iran-Iraq war was brought to a close by the combatants’ exhaustion, but peacekeeping provided a face-saving way towards peace; even the Control Commission in Vietnam, though scarcely a success, provided a cover to mask American withdrawal. So substantial has our role been that when the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to U.N. peacekeepers, the Canadian armed services believed, with substantial justification, that the prize was really meant for them.

[…] The need for peacekeeping is sure to continue; in Cambodia or in Kashmir or in the Gulf, there will always be a war to be stopped and a peace to be restored. Canada needs armed forces, men and women who have the skills and courage to handle the nation’s hard chores in an unknowable future – and if peacekeeping is one way to help keep them, then peacekeeping should be welcomed. But the cautious response – the demands for ceasefires, time limitations, mediations, and other preconditions – this too must be remembered. Peacekeeping, yes; but peacekeeping only when it has a chance to succeed and when it does not expose our service personnel to unacceptable risks.

*This book with its rather positive conclusions are interesting to be put to the test by the more recent engagements of the Canadian Forces, namely in Afganistan.*