

New historic Battle Honour for Canadian jet fighter squadrons bittersweet

The Canadian government's recent but unheralded decision to award Battle Honours to two Canadian CF-18 air force squadrons which participated in the Kosovo air war establishes a well-deserved place for them in Canadian military history.

But the news is bittersweet at best for the men and women of 441 Tactical Fighter Squadron of 4 Wing CFB Cold Lake, Alberta, and 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron of 3 Wing CFB Bagotville, Quebec.

Here is why.

It is little known that what the 69 pilots and some 250 ground crew did during the 78-day bombing campaign between March 24 and June 10, 1999, was nothing short of remarkable.

Flying in 684 combat sorties in 224 missions out of Aviano, Italy, as part of Operation Echo, the Canadian contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organizations' Operation Allied Force, the Canadian CF-18s comprised a little less than two per cent of nearly 1,000 Op Allied Force warplanes.

Nonetheless, the Canadians flew in nearly 10 per cent of the bombing missions, considered the most dangerous of all the missions flown.

More than 82 per cent of the Canadian effort involved bombing missions, combat air patrols and other close-air support missions.

By the time the ceasefire was agreed to, Canadian pilots had dropped nearly 500,000 pounds of gravity and precision-guided bombs.

More importantly, the Canadians had helped NATO put an end to Slobodan Milosevic's soldiers' and paramilitary forces' murderous ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo in which it was estimated 10,000 died, thousands went missing and some 740,000 were forced into exile.

It would take a book to tell the story of the hardships the Canadian airmen and women overcame during that war, the dangers they faced under withering enemy fire and the innovation required of them in battle as a result of years of federal government neglect of the Canadian Forces.

Unfortunately, the sad tale of how they returned to Canada unrecognized by the public and the government for their efforts would also be part of that book.

Astonishingly non were killed during this Operation and while it is perhaps cynical to suggest that had pilots been lost, perhaps Canadians would know more of their sacrifice and bravery, so be it. For its part, the government refused to strike a medal specifically for their participation in NATO's Operation Allied Force.

It took six years after the war ended for the pilots who flew five sorties over Kosovo to be awarded the General Campaign Star and the ground crew who served 30 cumulative days the General Service Medal, both with Allied Force Bars to replace the NATO peacekeeping medals they were originally given.

That was better than nothing and the air crews' bitterness over not specifically being awarded their own medal has since given way to resignation.

Now, the news that 441 and 425 Tactical Fighter Squadrons have been awarded Battle Honours ought to be a cause for celebration.

Governor-General Michaëlle Jean approved the creation of the Kosovo theatre Battle Honour on September 14.

Battle Honours are commemorated on infantry battalions' and air force squadrons' colours and armoured regiments' guidons, which are swallow-tailed pennons or flags that commemorate historical battles in which they fought.

For 441 Squadron, that adds Kosovo to the Defence of Britain 1945; Fortress Europe 1944; Normandy France and Germany 1944-45; and Arnhem Walcheren.

For 425 Squadron, Kosovo is added to the English Channel and North Sea 1942-1943; Fortress Europe 1942-1944; France and Germany 1944-1945; Biscay Ports 1943-1944; Ruhr 1942-1945; Berlin 1944; German Ports 1942-1945; Normandy 1944; Rhine Biscay 1942-1943; Sicily 1943; and Italy 1943 Salerno.

No more needs to be said about the significance of the Kosovo Battle Honour.

As a result of their long histories, soldiers revere their regiments, sailors revere their ships and air force members revere their squadrons.

Here is the problem.

In the summer of 2005, the crews of 425 and 433 Tactical Fighter Squadrons were amalgamated to form 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron, the sole fighter squadron in 3 Wing at CFB Bagotville. The bitterness created by one fiercely-proud squadron being disbanded while the other survived was wretched.

To avoid that at CFB Cold Lake, it was decided not to favor one over another and both 441 and 416 Squadrons were disbanded in July 2006 and amalgamated into 409 Tactical Fighter Squadron.

Leave it to the Canadian Forces to shoot both feet, rather than just one, to make things better.

As a result, one of two squadrons awarded the Kosovo Battle Honour – 441 Squadron – no longer exists. Its colours have been laid to rest at city hall in its affiliated city, Sydney, N.S.

As if that weren't disheartening enough, as a result of the Battle Honours Committee taking so long to recommend allocation of the Kosovo Battle Honour, many – if not most of the members who served with distinction in Aviano – are out of the Forces.

They now know their squadrons earned their rightful place in Canadian military history, but that's why the news about the Kosovo Battle Honours remains only bittersweet.

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