

COLUMNS

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New battle honour for fighter squads Recognition given for meritorious service in 1999 Kosovo air war



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Lieut.-Col. Alain Pelletier, then a major, led the first Canadian flight in the 1999 air campaign over Kosovo.

Quietly and without fanfare, Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean approved the award of the new battle honour "Kosovo" for two CF-18 fighter squadrons last September. The honour, the first to Canadian Forces units since "Gulf and Kuwait" was awarded for the 1990-91 Gulf War, is for their role in the little-known 1999 air campaign over the Yugoslavian province of Kosovo.

Battle honours are an army custom inherited from the British Forces. They publicly recognize the participation - usually victorious - of a navy ship, an army armoured or infantry regiment or an air-force squadron in a particular battle or campaign.

Many honours

Since the first Canadian battle honour - "Niagara" - awarded during the War of 1812 to Upper Canada's Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles and the 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment, Canadian units have collectively won more than 270 battle honours. The majority of these are to army units, marking participation in the Fenian Raids, North-West Rebellion, Boer War, First and Second World

Wars and Korean conflict.

It was not until the Second World War that ships of the Royal Canadian Navy and squadrons of the Royal Canadian Air Force gained their first battle honours. The navy subsequently earned honours for Korea and the Gulf War, while the air force received them for the Gulf War.

A limited number of battle honours earned by individual army regiments and air-force squadrons are displayed on their colours, guidons or standards, while naval honours are shown on ships' battle boards.

The air campaign over Kosovo - known as Operation Allied Force - was part of NATO's attempt to end Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic's brutal ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. Under Milosevic's direction, an estimated 10,000 people were slaughtered, several thousand went missing and 850,000 fled their homes.

Flying their CF-18 Hornets out of Aviano Air Base in Italy, 69 pilots - supported by 250 ground crew - of 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron from CFB Bagotville, Que., and 441 Tactical Fighter Squadron from CFB Cold Lake, Alta., completed 684 combat sorties. It was the most extensive combat air campaign undertaken by Canada's air force since the Second World War.

Comprising less than two per cent of nearly 1,000 NATO warplanes, Canadian pilots flew almost 10 per cent of all bombing missions. Canadians also took part in combat air patrols and close air-support missions, but bombing runs were considered the most dangerous.

Remarkably, neither 425 nor 441 squadrons suffered any losses in the 78-day bombing campaign, conducted between March 24 and June 10, 1999. During the air war, Canadian fighter-bombers dropped nearly 225,000 kilograms of gravity and precision-guided bombs, an important part of the overall NATO effort that forced Milosevic to stop his vicious assault.

Sadly for historical and heritage purposes, the award of this battle honour is somewhat marred by subsequent events. Beginning in 2005, the air force amalgamated its four existing CF-18 squadrons - 425 and 433 at Bagotville, and 416 and 441 at Cold Lake - into two squadrons.

At Bagotville, 433 squadron was disbanded and its crews and aircraft integrated into 425 squadron. The resentment caused by 433's disbandment - which had 11 battle honours from the Second World War - was something the air force decided not to repeat.

When amalgamation occurred at Cold Lake in July 2006, both 416 and 441 squadrons were disbanded and 409 squadron - the first operational CF-18 unit, which had previously been disbanded in 1994 - reformed in their place. The net result was that one of only two units awarded Canada's newest battle honour had already ceased to exist by the time that honour was announced.

Colours deposited

When units are disbanded, their colours are laid up - usually in a church or another appropriate location. In 1942, during the Second World War, the unit was formed as 125 squadron at Sydney before it deployed to England in 1944 and became 441 squadron. In recognition of this connection, the squadron's colours were deposited at Sydney's City Hall.

It's unfortunate that the air force took this course of action, removing the opportunity for continuity of its most recent battle honour. Fortunately, should 441 squadron ever be reformed at some future date, "Kosovo" will be part of that new unit's heritage - and a fitting tribute to the airmen and airwomen who helped put paid to a nasty dictator's ruthless drive for power.

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