

# War in the Balkans



JTF2 Training Exercise (DND)

## Joint Task Force Two Canada's Secret Soldiers

*The National Magazine's [Michael McAuliffe](#) looks at the mystery of Joint Task Force Two, known as Canada's "Secret Soldiers."*



It was a stunning allegation--that elite commandos were operating secretly on the ground in Kosovo, helping NATO planes choose targets. In this case, the soldiers are Canadians. That was the charge made in the Commons by Conservative MP David Price. The government has denied it -- repeatedly. But the controversy has drawn attention to Canada's Secret Joint Task Force II. Could they be operating in Kosovo?

Everyone seems eager to talk about the secret Canadian commandos. Everyone, it seems, except the Chretien government. Canada's Joint Task Force II are experts at remaining out of sight, out of mind out of the headlines. Until now.

Joint Task Force II has been something of an open secret ever since it was formed in

**War in the Balkans**

[Index](#)

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Force Two  
April 22, 1999

**Links**

[Canada's Joint Task  
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JTF2 Training (DND)

1993. People have been aware of its existence, but it's rarely discussed in the media because no one will ever talk about its operations. That's partly for reasons of safety, but it's also because JTF2 has been far more active overseas than either the Chretien government or Canadian military seem prepared to admit. Counter-terrorism was once the domain of the RCMP's special emergency response team until 1993, when the government decided to transfer its anti-terrorist hostage rescue duties to the Canadian military.

Former intelligence officer John Thompson says planners also intended JTF2 as a new Canadian cousin to the U.S. Green Berets and British SAS.



John Thompson

"It was justified originally as a counter-terror force. But we really had no special forces community of our own and there was very much a desire to want to get involved," Thompson says. "Also in the special forces community, there's a lot of interesting things going on and a lot of intelligence that's created. And if you're not in it, you don't know what's going on."

Soon JTF2 members were working overseas. They provided security for Canadian Gen. Maurice Baril on a 1996 visit to Rwanda and Zaire. But the military refuses to confirm JTF2 engages in any foreign activity beyond that.

At a news briefing, a reporter asked, "Just to make sure I'm clear... they do not operate overseas? There is no foreign role for JTF2?"



Brig. Gen. David Jurkowski

"It is conceivable they could on some missions," replied Brig. Gen David Jurkowski. "But if anything, it would be a very benign observer type mission and it wouldn't be outside their area at all, outside our areas. But that normally doesn't happen. They

are domestically oriented; they do not go out and do commando raids."

That's not entirely true. JTF2 may be domestically oriented, but at least a handful of its members are dispatched on every major Canadian peacekeeping operation.

In fact, when 55 Canadian soldiers were detained in Bosnia, in the winter of 1994, JTF2 was dispatched overseas to prepare a commando-like rescue mission that in the end was never needed. And there are other benign activities the military refuses to discuss.



Hostage rescue exercise (DND)

At the news briefing, Jurkowski denied Canadians were used to help target or identify targets for bombing raids.

But Thompson says, "They were involved in Bosnia during the NATO bombings that brought about the Dayton Accord. They were in the area. They were targeting, lasering targets for the airforce. This is a special forces operation now where you have eyes on the ground with a laser designator, and you aim a laser at a target so that an aircraft can drop a smart bomb on it."

Brian Bender, the Washington bureau chief for *Jane's Defence Weekly*, believes if JTF2 isn't in Kosovo now, it will be soon.

"We have been able to confirm that, yes, indeed, there are special forces operating inside Kosovo -- both U.S., British, as well as Canadian, it appears," Bender says. "These guys are trained to literally live on their own; to live off the land if they need to for days, if not months at a time, therefore increasing the chances that they're not detected and it doesn't get out to the enemy what in fact they're doing there."



Brian Bender

John Thompson agrees, and says having JTF2 on the ground right now would only be in keeping with Canada's NATO commitments, though he understands why the issue

is so sensitive for the Chretien government.

"For the organization to be operating in Kosovo it wouldn't be unusual," Thompson says. "If they are involved in Kosovo, it makes it look like the Canadian government has secretly started the ground war aspect of the Kosovo operation without consulting anybody outside of the Cabinet."

Canadian or not, special forces in Kosovo provide NATO with much more than laser targeting. As a source of on-the-ground intelligence, they're a vital first step before any larger ground intervention. The prime minister has signalled Canada's willingness to send troops to Kosovo, along with everyone else. Many other countries already have special forces in the region. Joint Task Force Two may not be there yet, but few people seem to doubt it will be there.



Joint Task Force Two training (DND)



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