Canadian Military History

Volume 17 | Issue 2 Article 2

2008

# A Force of Reason: Canada, Central America, and the *Grupo de Observadores de la Naciones Unidas para Centro America*

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# A Force of Reason
## Canada, Central America, and the *Grupo de Observadores de la Naciones Unidas para Centro America* (ONUCA), 1983-1992

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Though the Cold War never led to open hostilities between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers did engage in a seemingly endless series of wars by proxy in their struggle for dominance over international affairs. One of the major arenas was Central America, where regional politics influenced by ideologies led to decades of internal and external strife. Yet a glimmer of hope for peace emerged in the early 1980s even though acrimonious relations persisted between the US and USSR. Central and South American governments, with the encouragement of more distant nations, began a process of negotiation that eventually led to a reversal of the cycle violence.[1] Canada played a leading role in providing substantial diplomatic and military assistance.[2] It was not the first time that the country had assumed the role of impartial arbiter in international affairs. However, Canada's political involvement and its subsequent participation in the *Grupo de Observadores de la Naciones Unidas para Centro America* (ONUCA) presented unique political and military challenges that foreshadowed the tremendous difficulties Canadian peacekeepers would face just a few years later in the Balkans.

### Setting the Stage for Peace

Central America suffered from conflict throughout most of the Cold War as numerous militant factions wrestled for political, economic, and territorial control. Ongoing disputes between military juntas and leftist guerrillas destabilized the region, with ongoing wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala being particularly violent. The growing crisis prompted several international leaders and activists to push for a resolution of the conflicts at the beginning of the 1980s, expressing the fear that if the situation was allowed to deteriorate any further the Central American wars might seriously disrupt the western alliance.[3]

In early 1983 the governments of Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela met at Isla Contadora just off the Panamanian coast to discuss options for an all-encompassing regional peace accord. It was a remote, but not inappropriate, location having previously come to international notice in 1979 as the temporary place of exile for the Shah of Iran. The participants produced a document of objectives, which included the promotion of democracy, the ending of armed conflict, improvements in compliance with international laws, and economic revitalization. In September 1983 the "Contadora Group" ratified the list at a signing ceremony in Panama City.

In 1984 the Contadora Group presented a second initiative named the Contadora Act on Peace and Cooperation in Central America. Though often considered a failure in Latin American political history, the act was an

ambitious initiative aimed at the whole Central American region, and a watershed for the Inter-American system and the United States-Latin American relationship. More important, it led to significant changes in the roles of both the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS) in Latin America, and planted the seeds for the notion of "zones of peace" across the western hemisphere and in particular, in areas of conflict in the Central American region.[4]

The demise of the Contadora Act in late 1986 resulted in a new initiative put forward by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias at a summit in February 1987 – "*Una hora para la paz*" ["A Time For Peace"]. The Arias peace proposal differed greatly from the Contadora Act in that there was a greater emphasis on internal democratisation and a reduced role for external actors. The plan retained the Contadora principle of disarmament and verification by a third party however, and requested that the secretary-general of the United Nations, the OAS, and the foreign ministers of the Contadora plan nations and support group countries form this oversight committee. It went against American policy towards Nicaragua by encouraging the disarmament of the Contras while simultaneously encouraging the Sandinista government to move towards a more democratic state. The White House would have preferred the Sandinistas make the first move, but, Arias correctly argued that a move towards peace required concurrent enforcement by all parties.

Two attempts were made by the US in the summer of 1987 to sink the Arias proposal. The first, in July at Tegucigalpa, failed when Mexico prevented Honduras from replacing the Arias draft.[5] The occasion of the second attempt to supersede Arias' document, known as the "Reagan-Wright Plan," was the Esquipulas meeting where the five Central American presidents planned to endorse Arias' proposal. Arias had been forewarned of the American manoeuvre and was able to persuade his four colleagues to ratify his peace proposal on 7 August 1987.[6]

With a formal agreement reached, the "Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America," known both as the Esquipulas II Agreement and the Guatemala Procedure, came into effect. Designed initially to end hostilities between government forces and insurrectionist movements in the five Central American countries, the process grew to include several aspects of democratisation.[7] The Esquipulas II Agreement called for an immediate cease-fire, national reconciliation, amnesty, democratisation, an end to aiding insurgent movements, and free elections. While not fundamentally altering the structure of the Central American region it created a mutual confidence that ultimately allowed several peace building measures to move ahead. The key to ensuring the longevity of the peace agreement was the provision of an unbiased means of security and verification.

Efforts to enforce Esquipulas II quickly stagnated. The International Commission for Verification and Follow-up (CIVS - *Comisión Internacional de Verificación y Seguimiento*) formed to enforce the agreement, met with considerable difficulties in the field. Both its mandate and authority were never fully clarified, a basic error considering that the CIVS was expected to determine the most appropriate verification organization and operations.[8] The CIVS membership of South American and other neutral parties to counter US challenges to its legitimacy, moreover, suggested to the Central American states that outsiders were dictating their future. Worse still, the activities of the CIVS appeared to be partial towards groups opposing the Central American governments, and this perceived favouritism quickly led to the commission's demise. The report filed by the CIVS in January 1988 heavily criticised the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Unsurprisingly, the Central American governments (with the exception of Nicaragua which had received relatively little criticism) dismissed the report outright and politely but swiftly shut down the CIVS.[9]

It was well over a year before another attempt at verification of Esquipulas II was made. In the meantime, fighting broke out once more along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border between Sandinista forces and Contras, further jeopardizing the conditions for peace. In April 1988 a meeting of the Esquipulas Executive Commission (consisting of the Central American foreign ministers) resulted in the creation of a Technical Advisory Group (TAG), made up of Canada, Spain, the Federal Republic of Germany,


Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2008

Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre (CFJIC) IXC90-22

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Equipment arrives in-country to support Canada's contribution to ONUCA:

**Left**: A Canadian Forces truck, pre-painted in UN white, rolls off a ship after the voyage from Canada.

**Below**: CF ground crew unpacking a newly-arrived Canadian Jet Ranger helicopter at Tegucigalpa Airport, Honduras.

and Venezuela. The TAG set the parameters for the verification of the peace process and was in essence the predecessor and catalyst of ONUCA, and those involved in the former eventually became the core of the latter.[10]

With the conditions for peace in place, the OAS and the UN were requested to provide both civilian and military elements to monitor and verify the fulfilment of the commitments contained in the Esquipulas II agreement.[11] ONUCA, the first UN military mission to the region, was established by the UN Security Council in November 1989. Though the conditions for peace in Central America were favourable, Canadian presence and leadership in ONUCA at both the political and military level became instrumental in ensuring the success of the entire process.

## Implementation of the Peace Plan

The Contadora Act negotiations of the early 1980s coincided with a renewed interest in the region by Canada. Influenced by a variety of Canadian public and private interest groups, the House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence (SCEAND) published a major report in 1982 entitled *Canada's Relations With Latin America and the Caribbean*.[12] The document recommended a higher priority for the whole region in Canadian foreign policy and a conference of representatives of all the states in the Americas to discuss security issues in the Caribbean and Central America. It was the first step in an increased Canadian political interest in the region, after decades of aloofness.[13]

Despite a desire to increase Canadian influence, Ottawa had to be mindful of potential confrontations with the United States. While Washington argued that the Central American conflict was the result of an export of revolution by a Moscow-Havana axis, Canada generally believed that the root cause lay in historical


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**Right**: CF personnel unload a Hercules transport aircraft.
**Below**: A UN observer group patrols their assigned area.

socio-economic problems.[14] The 1982 SCEAND report had neither recommended that Canada consider membership in the Organization of American States (OAS) nor add its signature to the Rio Pact. However, the report clearly indicated that Canadian presence in Latin American affairs should be increased in the interests of a multi-lateral resolution of the conflicts.[15]

At the UN General Assembly in September 1983, Canadian Secretary for External Affairs Allan MacEachen supported Contadora and offered Canadian political support to any successful peace agreement. From October 1983 Canada became directly involved in advising all parties in the Central American peace negotiations, and made a particular contribution towards the design of the Control and Verification Commission in the various Contadora Act drafts.[16] In mid-1984 Mexico, which was traditionally suspicious of large peacekeeping forces, rejected the idea of a Canadian peacekeeping deployment, but Ottawa continued to examine how it might bring its extensive peacekeeping experience to bear on the region.[17]

Ironically, Canada's political absence from the region since the end of the Second World War allowed Ottawa to appear as a neutral actor, thus adding a degree of legitimacy to the peace negotiations. Canada reinforced its position by rejecting American pressure to favour El Salvador over Nicaragua in diplomatic communications. Canada had no desire to support the US vision of Central America as an East-West crisis.[18] Equally important, Canada was perhaps the best choice for mediation and assistance because of the country's experience in UN-mandated operations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Overall, Canada was not only a favourable candidate but also perhaps the only legitimate option available for successfully advancing the peacekeeping process in Central America.[19]

Canadian military involvement in the Central American peace process increased considerably as the United Nations became more involved in the Esquipulas II mandate. On 7 October 1987, the UN General Assembly published a resolution expressing complete support for the Esquipulas II agreement and requested the Secretary General to afford the fullest assistance of the UN towards

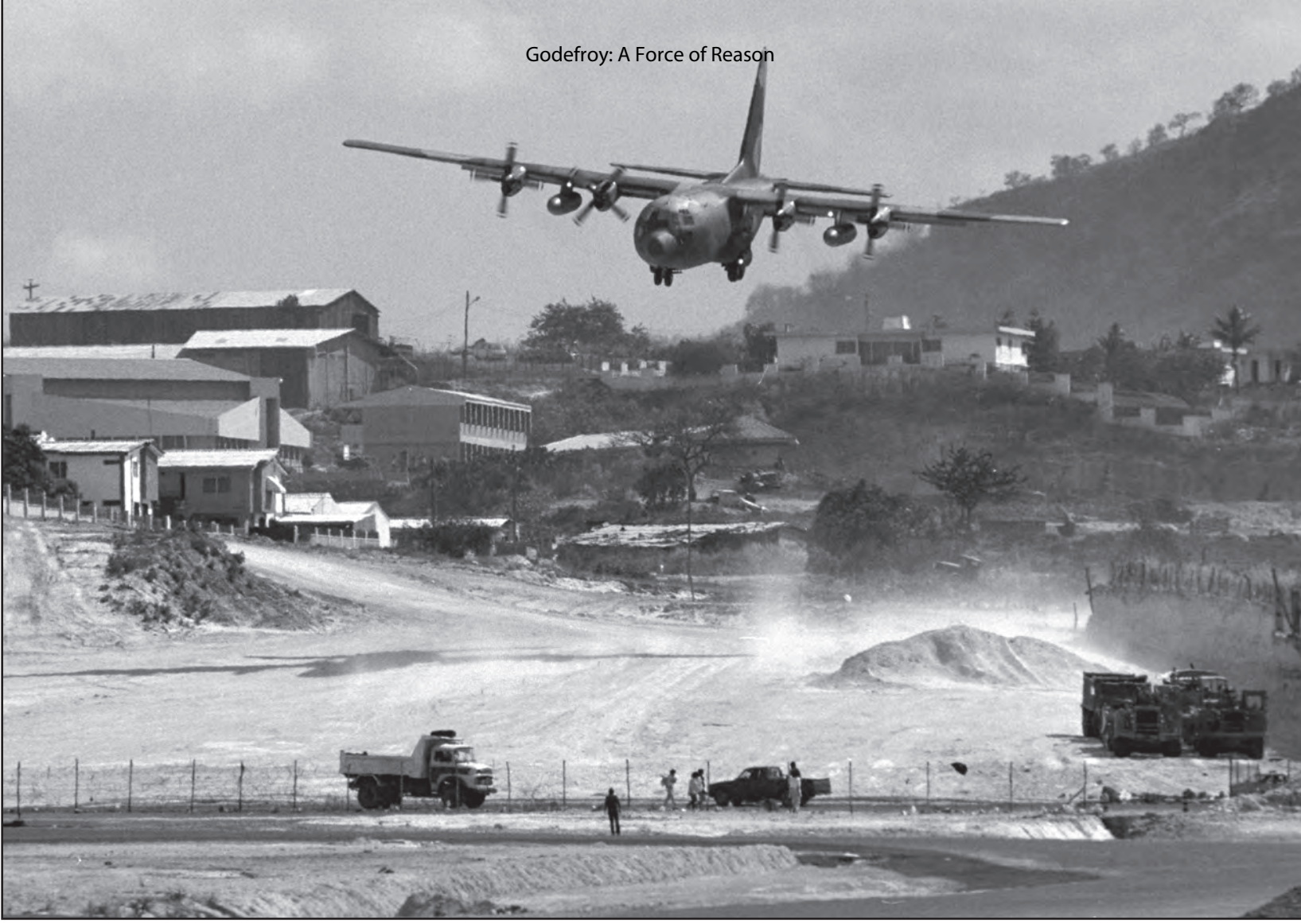
the Central American peace effort.[20] The following month the Canadian minister of External Affairs, Joe Clark, visited Central America, after which he stated that Canada was prepared to commit resources for part of or all the work required to bring the Esquipulas II agreement to fruition. There was then little doubt that Canada would be involved with any peacekeeping deployment to the region.

ONUCA was designed to concentrate in those areas where activities contrary to the security undertakings in the Esquipulas II Agreement were alleged to occur. Of particular concern were the borders between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, between Honduras and Nicaragua, between Honduras and El Salvador, and between Guatemala and El Salvador. Also the regions of northeastern Nicaragua and southwestern Honduras required close attention. When a complaint was registered with ONUCA, the mission would contact the government that was the subject of the complaint and ask for full cooperation in investigating the matter. The results of the investigation would then be transmitted to both governments concerned.[21]

Planning envisaged four phases for the ONUCA mission. In the first phase, following the approval by the UN Security Council to deploy ONUCA, an advance party of 30 military officers and civilian support staff led by the Chief Military Observer (CMO) would establish an operational headquarters (HQ) at Tegucigalpa, Honduras. In the second phase an additional 70 observers, five helicopters, and naval vessels would be deployed to ONUCA HQ, the liaison offices, and the verification centres. During this phase of the mission ONUCA would establish the ability to investigate complaints submitted by any government, and to conduct limited patrolling of the conflict areas. During the third phase of the mission, to be completed no later than three months after the arrival of the advance party, a further 63 observers would be deployed in nine more verification centres supported by an additional four helicopters. The new verification centres were to be deployed in strategic areas along the border where patrolling could be undertaken without major logistical requirements. The timing of the last phase of the mission would depend on the progress and results achieved in the previous phases and would see the deployment of another 98 observers and three helicopters at 14 new verification centres. This last phase would bring the total to 33 verification centres and 260 military observers,[22] enough, it was expected, to undertake patrolling of the entire Central American region.[23]

In November 1987, the Department of National Defence (DND) dispatched two senior officers with the minister of External Affairs on his visit to Central America to conduct a detailed mission analysis to assess the proposed concept of operations. One of the two officers was Lieutenant-Colonel Don Ethell, a Canadian soldier with considerable peacekeeping experience. Lieutenant-Colonel Ethell produced a comprehensive report highlighting the difficulties of terrain, financial and logistical challenges, and, most important, the requirement for a clearly defined mandate and terms of reference prior to the deployment of any military personnel.[24] Both DND and the Department of External Affairs (DEA) felt that while there was a general consensus amongst the Central American leaders on the idea of peace, there was a reluctance to define clearly the details of that peace. Yet the devil of complex peacekeeping was in the details, and Canadian soldiers, unarmed and acting only as observers, had no desire to find themselves ill-equipped to face disputes that were sure to arise. DEA concurred and demanded clarity from the regional actors. Joe Clark argued in the House of Commons, "That kind of vagueness was useful in getting agreement on the peace plan in the first place, but it is not good enough now. The regional presidents should be encouraged as loudly as possible to decide what they mean by peace, and just exactly how they propose to go about maintaining it."[25]

A number of technical considerations about the proposed military mission also had to be considered. The nature of the terrain presented numerous challenges. Complex hills, peaks, and valleys hidden under layers of jungle canopy meant that area coverage would be difficult at best, as would the detection and discrimination of various groups moving throughout the region. DND concluded that any UN mission would require either large-scale forces stationed all across the region at key points, or a smaller, highly mobile force that could readily move between key points. As well, the success of the mission depended upon accurate and timely reporting, but again the terrain of some of the



A CF Hercules on final approach to a Central American airfield.

states made some communications very difficult and others impossible. DND concluded that a peacekeeping mission in Central America would be impossible without considerable political and technical support for the deployments.[26] Given the state of the Canadian Forces (CF) in 1989, any involvement of its troops in theatre would be dependent on additional assets or support to be successful.

Both the political and the military assessments of ONUCA's mandate were indicative of the change then underway in UN missions in general. Traditionally, UN missions were based upon the principles set down in 1958, where forces were deployed with the consent of all parties and remained strictly impartial. The primary roles of soldiers on the ground were to defuse tension, stabilize situations, and arbitrate disputes. Such missions were generally achievable despite the division of the Security Council during the Cold War. With a foreseeable end to the East-West struggle, however, the UN felt the chains of inertia were removed from the Security Council as it made the transition from competition to cooperation. A renewed sense of internationalism was also giving the UN a moral imperative to intervene where intra-state disorder and massive human rights abuses and suffering were taking place. UN missions at the end of the 1980s therefore contained elements not previously encountered, such as ONUCA's mandate to demobilize and disarm guerrilla armies as well as stabilize internal groupings and contribute to humanitarian aid and security.

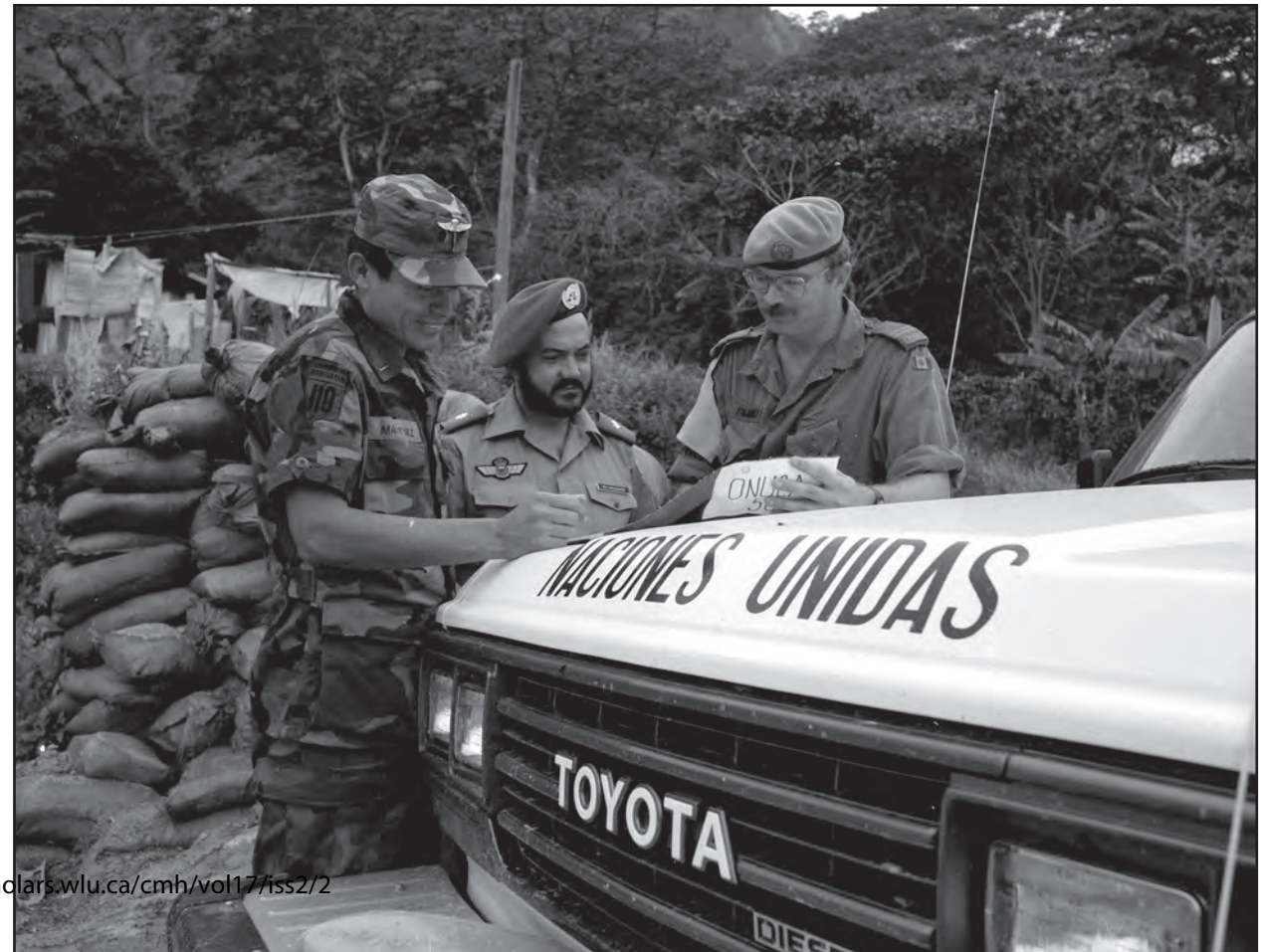
## The Canadian Deployment

Little effort was made in the Canadian Forces to prepare specifically for the ONUCA mission following the strategic reconnaissance conducted

in November 1987, and any number of factors may have contributed to this inactivity. While at the political level Canada was becoming deeply involved in Central America, the government was launching a revised defence policy that refocused attention on West European collective security. In June 1987, only two months before Esquipulas II was signed, the Canadian government tabled *Challenge and Commitment: A Defence Policy for Canada*, replacing the 1971 White Paper on defence. *Challenge and Commitment* considerably altered the previous Canadian defence policy, which had been described as overly optimistic in its assessment of future international relations, and detrimental to conventional force development as a deterrent to Soviet aggression.[27] Since 1971 the Canadian Forces had evolved, but not as the integrated force under centralized operational command that Minister of National Defence Paul Hellyer had envisioned when he led the restructuring of the armed forces in the 1960s. The land, sea and air elements of the unified forces continued to operate as distinct services in important yet largely separate activities in support of national defence, and the 1987 White Paper reinforced those separate, loosely linked roles.

Contingency planning for missions at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) was usually staffed in an ad hoc manner. Although studies were underway to improve joint operational staffing and planning, an organization specifically responsible for such activities in Ottawa did not appear until July 1990.[28] Therefore missions like ONUCA did not receive the direct attention of any particular military staff unless they were specifically ordered to do so. DND and the CF were later criticized for being ill prepared for ONUCA when an official announcement of Canadian participation arrived at NDHQ in December 1989, but such complaints were misguided.[29] The 1987 White Paper directed that Canada would not undertake any peacekeeping mission if "participation will jeopardise other commitments…and whether participation is adequately and equitably funded and logistically supported."[30] Helicopters were to be a main component of the Central American operation, yet Canada had just committed a significant portion of its operational fleet. In 1986 Canada began participating in the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Middle East, replacing the Australian-New Zealand helicopter unit with assets from the Canadian Forces' No.408

Captain Steve France, Royal Canadian Regiment (right), discusses the situation at the Honduran/Nicaraguan border with Second Lieutenant Jose Martinez (left) of the Honduran Army and another unidentified UN officer.

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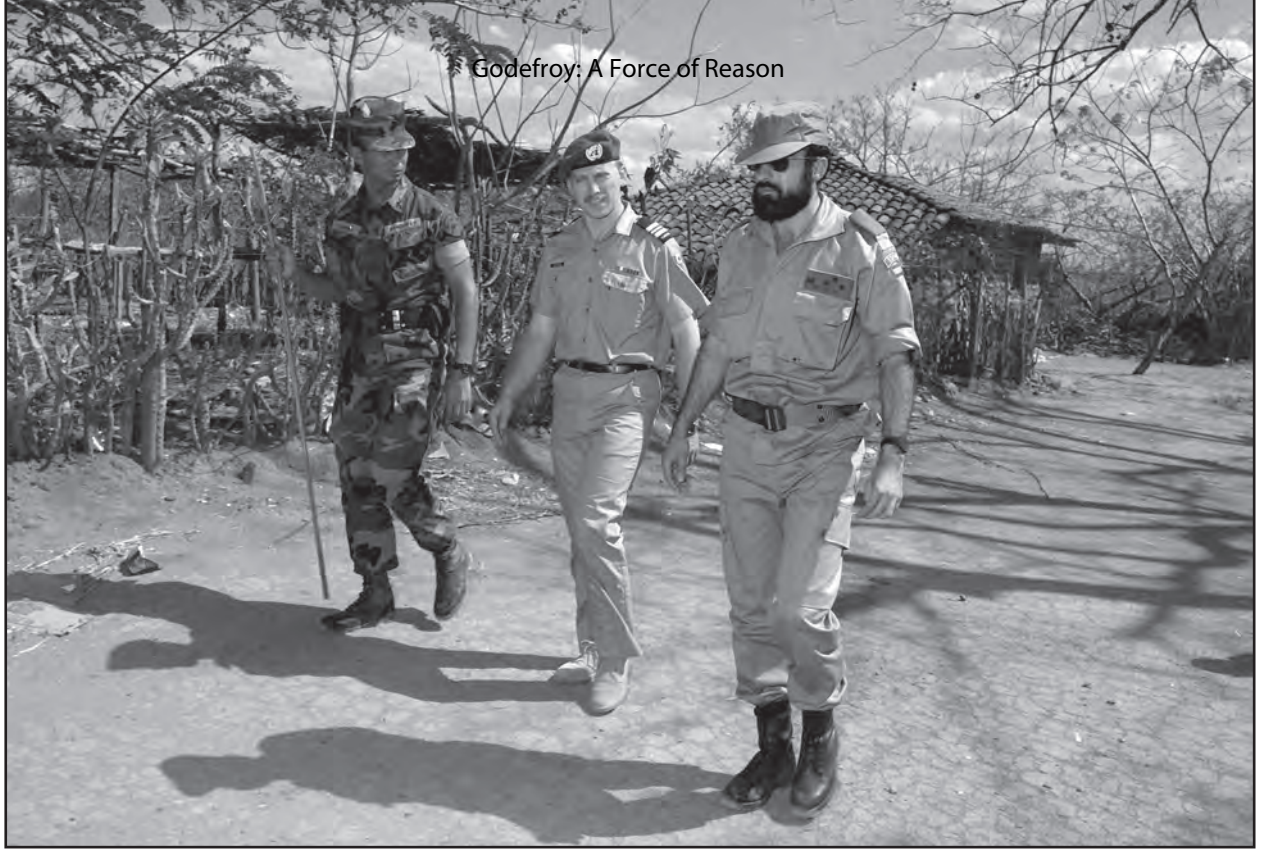

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Major Rene Gervais (centre) of Canada and Captain Ricardo Illan (right) of Spain, tour the Honduran/Nicaraguan border crossing point at El Guasaule, accompanied by Lieutenant Ramirez of the Honduran Army.

Squadron.[31] As well, the established policy for Canada was to have two thousand CF members available for peacekeeping at any one time. In 1989-90 Canada had approximately 1,100 members already deployed.[32]

The ONUCA mission, moreover, still waited on the unanimous consent of five states that traditionally mistrusted one another, and then confirmation by Ottawa. Extensive pre-planning by DND seemed unrealistic given its other numerous tasks.[33] Previous experience had demonstrated that the government was quick to change decisions with respect to UN missions, and in other cases Canadian intentions were simply superseded by events. NDHQ staffs were already stretched and widely committed, and there is nothing to suggest that the ONUCA mission received any less attention than other contingency operations under consideration at that time.

Even though the final decision to commit Canadian military resources to ONUCA had yet to be made, DND was directed by the government to attach three officers to a reconnaissance team to the region led by Brigadier-General Péricles Ferreira Gomes of Brazil in September 1989.[34] Brigadier-General Gomes had previously been Chief Military Observer (CMO) of the United Nations Angola Verification Mission, and was very experienced in missions with mandates similar to that of the ONUCA operation. Following the completion of this reconnaissance and Gomes' report to the UN secretary-general, the deployment of ONUCA came to the UN Security Council.[35] On 7 November 1989, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 644 (1989), approving the deployment of military peacekeepers to the region. Canada agreed in principle to contribute about 40 military observers as well as up to 100 helicopter aircrew and eight CH-139 Jet Ranger helicopters. Three weeks later in Ottawa, Brigadier-General Ian C. Douglas was notified that OPERATION SULTAN (Canada's designation for the ONUCA deployment) had begun, and that he was to become ONUCA's chief of staff (COS) as well as commander of the Canadian contingent. Major Claude Guerin was to be Douglas' deputy commanding officer (DCO). Another senior Canadian officer, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Morris, was appointed senior staff officer air operations at ONUCA HQ.[36] In total nine CF members were tasked to deploy with the advance party on 3 December, with an additional 12 members augmenting the advance party on 4 January 1990.[37] The total lead contingent numbered approximately 30 military officers, 13 medical staff, and three pilots. This group established the ONUCA HQ in the offices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital.


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Major Claude Guerin, DCO of the Canadian ONUCA contingent, and Major Peter Abbott, maintenance officer, discuss local security with a Honduran policeman near the Danli Verification Centre.

Brigadier-General Douglas had a wide range of command responsibilities, including ensuring that liaison offices were established in the capitals of all five countries and that the necessary arrangements were made for the establishment of the first group of verification centres. As well, accommodations at the Tegucigalpa Airport had to be prepared for the arrival of Canada's 89 Rotary Air Wing Unit [89 (Cdn) RWAU] as well as a Dornier 228-200 light aircraft arriving from Germany. All of this was accomplished without incident.[38]

## Mission Evolution

The ONUCA advance party was immediately faced with unexpected challenges. Setting up in Guatemala and Costa Rica was sluggish for many reasons, and ONUCA was unable to establish any liaison or verification centres in El Salvador until mid January 1990. Much more troubling, just as the UN Security Council was about to approve Resolution 644 creating ONUCA, failed negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the left-wing *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) led to open violence. On 31 October 1989, the FMLN bombed a Salvadoran Trade Union building killing ten people and wounding 20 others. The FMLN then announced its cessation of negotiations with the government and launched a major offensive two weeks later. Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani declared a state of emergency, and within days both sides had suffered over two thousand casualties in continuous fighting around the capital city.[39] The crash of a Nicaraguan aircraft laden with missiles and other arms in El Salvador on 25 November 1989 did little to ease political and military tensions. The Cristiani government accused Nicaragua of supplying the FMLN with arms and immediately suspended diplomatic and economic ties with the country. This in turn led to an announcement by the UN and OAS on 5 December, two days after the ONUCA advance team had arrived, that plans for the demobilisation of the Contras by the end of 1989 were no longer possible. The situation remained fluid as more UN peacekeepers and their equipment arrived.

The FMLN offensive brought immediate political reaction from Ottawa. On 22 November, Michael Jay, the Central American programme officer for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), announced that the Canadian government's bilateral aid programme for El Salvador had been temporarily halted. The programme consisted of over a hundred separate projects, many of which were perceived as only assisting the El Salvadoran government in freeing its own funds for military purposes.[40] Canadian immigration officers in El Salvador issued 100 emergency minister's permits to Salvadorans for reunification with their families in Canada, and ran an emergency airlift that rescued about three hundred Salvadoran refugees from the raging civil war.[41] These were effective measures and served as a tangible demonstration of the two-tier political/military approach Ottawa had taken to encourage peace in the region.

To help reduce sporadic violence in the region, ONUCA's mandate was expanded on 12 December to include the verification and cessation of hostilities as well as the demobilisation of irregular forces that might be agreed upon in the region.[42] For the UN military observers (UNMO) on the ground this meant more work, but also the opportunity to achieve a lasting effect. It was hoped that ONUCA could disband Contra bases along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, and assist with the demobilisation of the FMLN in El Salvador. During the next two weeks ONUCA established 13 verification centres, each garrisoned with up to ten UNMOs. Canadian soldiers and aircrew were issued with jungle survival kits and other necessary gear, while the Jet Ranger helicopters were repainted, given UN aircraft markings, and fitted with special communications equipment, distance measuring equipment, and infrared suppression kits. The last item was a wise precaution because even with UN markings the ONUCA helicopters might be perceived as a threat, accidentally or otherwise. The suppression kits provided some protection against the heat-seeking surface-to-air (SAM) missiles that the FMLN guerrillas and Contras were believed to still have in their arsenals.[43]

Once in place, Canadian and other ONUCA UNMOs immediately made their presence and mission known to the local organizations and populations. This was no small task, as a single operational post could be responsible for patrolling over a hundred kilometres of complex terrain. UNMOs conducted daily patrols of their areas of responsibility by land, air, and even occasionally by river. Remote posts were often inaccessible by road, which in turn made the Canadian helicopters indispensable.[44] UN observers at Las Trojes, Honduras, for example, were responsible for a 110 kilometre section of the Honduran-Nicaraguan border that included the major Contra bases as well as three refugee camps.[45] The post also required all of its supplies to be airlifted in, as there was neither food nor accommodations in situ to support the observer teams.

Throughout January 1990 the conditions around El Salvador improved only slightly. The FMLN had been encouraged to return to

An ONUCA helicopter detachment including Canadian Jet Rangers sets off on a border patrol.


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negotiations with the Cristiani government, allowing the ONUCA liaison office to finally be established in San Salvador. However, the prevailing security conditions greatly restricted what observers could do and where they could go, which made demobilisation of the FMLN extremely difficult. As the year dragged on negotiation crumbled once more, and eventually the El Salvador situation merited its own separate UN mission the following year.[46]

The challenges facing ONUCA continually increased as the mission went on. With the exception of El Salvador, phase two of ONUCA began on schedule with the establishment of Verification Centres (VCs), and was completed by 18 January 1990. Additional Canadian material and personnel arrived in theatre that same week, augmenting the Canadian contingent's strength to 122 personnel and four helicopters.[47] The third phase of ONUCA (19 January to 4 March 1990) proved more difficult to complete. Some of the countries that initially committed to deploy troops found themselves unable or unwilling to provide all of the military observers required. This in turn affected ONUCA's ability to effectively patrol trouble spots making an arduous task even more difficult. Colonel John D. Joly, a senior Canadian officer who commanded Observer Group El Salvador (OGELS), noted in 1991 that ONUCA, "has neither the authority nor the capacity to prevent, by physical means, either the movement of armed persons or war-like material across borders or other violations."[48] He added, "in practice it quickly became clear that ONUCA's capacity was very limited…an international peace-keeping operation simply cannot undertake the detection of clandestine activities without assuming functions that properly belong to the security forces of the country or countries concerned."[49]

It proved difficult to find the four fast patrol boats needed to monitor the Gulf of Fonseca. Eventually, Argentina supplied the vessels and some crew with the remainder being made up once more by Canada.[50] Based at San Lorenzo, Honduras, the naval verification centre carried out daily patrols in the gulf and its approaches to the Pacific Ocean. Naval personnel observed and recorded patterns of maritime traffic so they could identify anything out of character. Additionally, Canadian naval observers made regular visits to naval bases maintained in or near the Gulf of Fonseca.[51]

## Demobilization and Transition

Despite the slow and at times painful steps taken towards peace, Canada believed that progress could be made with ONUCA. Fortunately, ONUCA's mandate was assisted by the rapid transition in East-West relations in 1990 that signalled the end of the Cold War. The drastic reduction in military and financial assistance from both Moscow and Washington to Central America weakened all factions and also encouraged the transition towards a peaceful settlement. On 9 February 1990, Minister of National Defence Bill McKnight announced in the House of Commons that, "in the case of Central America the level of risk is manageable, and is justified by the importance we attach to the process of advancing peace in the region."[52] Ottawa clearly sensed there was an opportunity to complete the mission successfully, and in turn augmented its troop commitment to ONUCA the following month. All five Central American governments perceived the additional Canadian support as a sign of good faith that demobilization and democratisation was possible.[53]

On 25 February the National Opposition Union (UNO) coalition headed by Mrs. Violeta Chamorro defeated President Daniel Ortega of the incumbent Sandinista government in a surprising upset. The Contras were jubilant over the results, and indicated their desire to disband as the conflict was now over. While some Contra leaders were hesitant to give up their arms, the end of American financial aid to their cause soon left the Contras with few resources to continue. As well, a large portion of Sandinista support had dissolved in the wake of the election, leaving Chamorro's UNO party the opportunity to demilitarise a large portion of Central America and establish a zone of peace.[54]

The demobilization of Contras required considerably more manpower than ONUCA could bring to bear and the unarmed UNMOs could not forcibly disarm anyone. Throughout this period General Douglas worked closely with all elements, achieving considerable success in implementing confidence-building measures. However, he was

frustrated by the lack of resources available to complete the task at hand. On 15 March the UN Security Council decided that additional air and land power would be required to effect the demobilisation and repatriation of the Contras and Sandinistas. UN Security Resolution 650 (1990) was passed the following week, enlarging the ONUCA mandate to include demobilisation operations and authorising the increase of the mission strength with armed personnel. Venezuela, who already had UNMOs with ONUCA, provided a paratrooper battalion to supervise

The Canadian ONUCA Contingent.

ground operations while Canada lent additional air support. On 22 March Ottawa announced that it was dispatching further pilots and support personnel, and augmenting the Canadian air element with an additional four Twin Huey helicopters.[55] The additional commitment raised the strength of the Canadian contingent to 169 all ranks.

The demobilization of all groups began in April 1990 and was largely completed by the end of July. On the night of 18-19 April, all Nicaraguan parties agreed to a series of arrangements that included an immediate cease-fire and separation of forces. Canadian soldiers were involved at all levels and in every area. General Douglas, who had been with ONUCA since the beginning, oversaw many of the weapon turn-ins and arranged for their proper disposal by the UN. What at first seemed unlikely in Central America had quickly turned into reality and the Canadian contingent had played a major role in providing the conditions to make peace possible. Scheduled to return to Canada soon after the demobilisation of Nicaragua had been completed, General Douglas had considered Canada's contribution to ONUCA thus far most influential and satisfying towards achieving peace.[56]

The process of seeking Douglas' successor began in April 1990. An offer by Brigadier-General Lewis W. Mackenzie to succeed him was originally denied by NDHQ, who then later reversed its decision and assigned him to take over the Canadian contingent. General Mackenzie reported to Ottawa in late April and received a two-week crash course in Spanish before heading to UN headquarters in June 1990 for further briefings. On 7 August 1990, General Mackenzie arrived in Tegucigalpa to complete his hand over from General Douglas.[57]

General Mackenzie was immediately faced with the challenge of determining the necessity of ONUCA's continued presence. General Douglas' success with the demobilization of the Contras had been so effective many were wondering if there was any further need for ONUCA now that the largest force that had destabilized the region had been subdued. As well, just days before his arrival Iraq invaded its smaller neighbour Kuwait, and Ottawa's attention immediately refocused towards this latest international crisis. General Mackenzie, on Ottawa's orders, substantially

reduced Canada's ONUCA contingent (with General Gomez' approval) to reflect both the decreased activity of the mission as well as a potential new demand for forces in the Persian Gulf.[58]

With little need to continue patrolling of remote border areas, most of Canada's air contingent returned home at the end of August 1990. Captain William Callaghan, the Adjutant of 89 (Cdn) RWAU, noted that his unit had, "played a major role in bringing the demobilisation of the Nicaraguan resistance movement to a successful conclusion."[59]

The reduction of the overall ONUCA deployment strength and the return of General Gomez to Spain left General Mackenzie as acting commander of the mission in December 1990. Canada's contingent had been reduced to about only 30 personnel, most having returned to their units in Canada or to fill positions vacated by Canadian Forces officers who deployed to the Persian Gulf. In March 1991, Canada dispatched eight observers to assist in the monitoring of municipal and legislative elections in El Salvador, but made no increases to its ONUCA contingent. General Mackenzie commanded ONUCA until 17 May 1991, when he handed the mission over to Brigadier-General Victor Suanez Pardo of Spain. General Pardo commanded ONUCA until its conclusion the following year.

## Conclusion

The Central American peace process took more than a decade to become effective. Canada was involved in the process nearly from the outset, contributing political and then military assistance. At both levels Canada acted as a force of reason. Ottawa's involvement at the political level was invaluable. Canadian presence and assistance in negotiations offset the traditional hemispheric hegemony of the United States, adding legitimacy because of the country's dispassionate credibility to Central American initiatives for peace. Canada's involvement at the military level ensured that experience and professionalism would characterise the ONUCA mission that was expected to carry out the complex mandate stipulated in the Esquipulas II Agreement. However, the willingness of the five Central American governments and their non-state actors to participate in the process ultimately ensured its success.

For the Canadian military many valuable lessons were learned from ONUCA. First and perhaps most important, ONUCA foreshadowed the 'new' peacekeeping of the 1990s where mandates became increasingly complex and peacekeeping itself became more dangerous. Robust leadership, command, and control was needed for success but at times military personnel on the ground found such support wanting. For example, while satisfied with the continuous political support from Ottawa and generally clear lines of communications with NDHQ, General Mackenzie later complained that his greatest frustrations instead were with the slow and complex decision-making system at UN headquarters in New York.[60] It was a nightmare that would that would be repeated in the Balkans.

The mission also revealed the capability gaps that existed within a Canadian military still oriented towards fighting a Euro-centric Third World War. Strategic command and control at NDHQ was improving, but missions such as ONUCA, the UN Transition Assistance Group to Namibia (UNTAG), and the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL), as well as missions such as Operation BANDIT (Haiti) during 1987-88, the Oka Crisis in 1990, and the Gulf War in 1990-91, all stressed the need for the creation of a strategic level joint operational staff as soon as possible. Operationally, force generation and force employment were showing stress, especially with the requirement to sustain a number of missions simultaneously across the globe. In 1990-91 CF elements were deployed in Central America, but they were also in Germany, the Gulf, the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. These deployments had a tremendous effect on both personnel and force structures, both of which were already stressed as a result of the government's military reductions in its search for a Cold War peace dividend.

Despite these deficiencies there was little that could be done at the time. In February 1992, just as the Canadian ONUCA mission was concluding, the Federal government tabled a new budget that included significant cuts to the military. The

commitment to leave the Standing Task Force in Europe was cancelled, and the 1,100 positions planned for that force were simply eliminated. The regular force component was further reduced, and the intended growth of the Army Reserve delayed.[61] Lieutenant-General Gervais, the Commander of the Army at the time, stated bluntly that the "demands for a peace dividend have created new realities in defence funding. They are reflected in restricted Regular Force manning levels, infrastructure rationalization, and tighter budgets for all resource managers. These factors are necessitating changes in the Army structure."[62]

Operations in complex terrain against elusive adversaries and targets demanded state of the art resources, tactics, techniques, and procedures. The CF had neither the mandate nor the resources adequately to focus on such requirements even though it was being committed to increasingly complex UN missions that required such capabilities. As well, the military was stretched thin by ongoing deployments and had no spares or reinforcements readily at hand; had something gone seriously wrong in Central America the Canadians may have had to withdraw from the mission. This would have had serious consequences for the CF, but also for Canadian foreign policy as a whole. It is therefore a testament to the quality of the men and women of the Canadian Forces who served with ONUCA that the mission was a success. That success gave a boost to the credibility of Canadian foreign policy because the country was able to play a positive role in the peace process in Central America at the end of the Cold War.

## Notes

1. United Nations, *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping. 3rd ed.*, (New York: UN Department of Public Information, 1996), p.409.
2. United Nations [UN]. Security Council document S/19085, UN Resolution 637 dated 27 July 1989, and UN Resolution 644 dated 7 November 1989. See http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1989/scres89.htm
3. Hal Klepak, *Verification of a Central American Peace Accord* (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1989), pp.6-11; and J.D. Joly, "ONUCA – A Story of Success in the Quest For Peace," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 20, no.6 (June 1991), pp.12-13.
4. J. Child, *The Central American Peace Process, 1983-1991* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), pp.1-2. For the Contadora Act see also B. Bagley, R. Alvarez, *et. al.*, *Contadora and the Central American Peace Process: Selected Documents* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985); B. Bagley, *Contadora and the Diplomacy of Peace in Central America*. 2 Vols., (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); and J. Dunkerly, *The Pacification of Central America: Political Change in the Isthmus, 1987-1993* (London: Verso Publishing, 1994).
5. Dunkerly, *The Pacification of Central America*, pp.40-45.
6. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, pp.45-47.
7. The five countries were Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.
8. UN Security Council document s/19085.
9. Child, *Central American Peace Process*, pp.51-53; Klepak, *Security Considerations and Verfication*, pp.6-10; and *The Blue Helmets*, pp.409-410.
10. Joly, "ONUCA," p.12, and *Blue Helmets*, pp.410-411. See also UN Security Council documents s/20856, s/20895, and s/20699/Add.1-A/44/344/Add.1.
11. UN Security Council document S/19085, UN Resolution 637 dated 27 July 1989, and UN Resolution 644 dated 7 November 1989. See http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1989/scres89.htm.
12. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, p.9. Child suggested the lobbying was done by a loose coalition of Canadian Church, Third World development, academic, and human rights non-government organizations (NGOs).
13. Hal Klepak, "Canada and Latin American Security, an Introduction," in Hal Klepak, ed. *Canada and Latin American Security* (Laval: Méridien Publishing, 1993), p.19. See also Canada. House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, *Canada's Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean* (Ottawa: SCEAND, 1982).
14. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, p.24 and M. Treleaven, "Canada, U.S., Vietnam, and Central America," *International Perspectives* (September-October 1986), pp.10-13. Child also has argued this point of view.
15. Klepak, "Canada and Latin American Security," p.18.
16. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, pp.24-25. See also "Canadian Offer to Monitor Peace Arrangements," *International Canada* (October-November 1983), and J.W. Graham, "Canada and Contadora", in B. McDonald, ed., *Canada, the Caribbean, and Central America* (Toronto: CISS, 1986).
17. G. Schmitz, *Canadian Foreign Policy in Central America* (Ottawa: Library of Parliament, 1986), p.26. Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid openly rejected Canadian offers for peacekeeping intervention during his visit to Canada in May 1984.
18. During his visit to Washington in early 1984, MacEachen was pressured by US Secretary of State George Schultz to increase Canadian backing for American supported governments in Central America. MacEachen and Ottawa responded negatively to the request.
19. Though several definitions and models exist, peacemaking/peacekeeping is considered the first level of addressing conflict, while confidence building measures (CBMs) is the second level of response. Peacemaking/peacekeeping deals with the techniques of resolving conflict through negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and conciliation, while CBMs include the use of techniques to retard further situations that may lead to a conflict environment. See Child, The Central American Peace Process, ch.1, for conceptual definitions and sources.
20. UN Resolution 42/1, 7 October 1987.

21. *Blue Helmets*, p.416; and Joly, "ONUCA," pp.13-16.
22. ONUCAs complete mandate was 625 personnel; 260 UNMOs, 365 technicians (115 aircrew and support, 50 naval crew and support, 14 medical staff, 104 UN international staff, and 82 locally hired civilians).
23. Joly, "ONUCA," p.13.
24. D.S. Ethell, "Central America Peacekeeping Observation Organization," unpublished draft paper, Ottawa, 1987.
25. Cited in Child, *Central American Peace Process*, p.51.
26. Klepak, *Verification of a Central American Peace Accord*, pp.38-51.
27. D. Middlemiss and J. Sokolsky, *Canadian Defence: Decisions and Determinants* (Toronto: HBJ Canada, 1989), p.49.
28. Sean M. Maloney, "Purple Haze: Joint Planning in the Canadian Forces from Mobile Command to J-Staff, 1975-1991 (Part 1)," *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin*, 5, no.4 (Winter 2002-03), pp.57-72; see also Grant Dawson. *"Here in Hell": Canada's Engagement in Somalia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), Chapter 2.
29. P. Babinsky, "A Military Perspective on UN Operations in Central America," in H. Klepak, ed., *Canada and Latin America Security*, p.181. Babinsky argued, perhaps unfairly, that DND and the CF were delinquent in adequately preparing their soldiers for deployment to Central America.
30. *Challenge and Commitment: A Defence Policy for Canada* (Ottawa: DND, 1987), pp.24-25.
31. See A. Cooper, "Multinational Force and Observers – Establishment of the Canadian Rotary Wing Aviation Unit," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 19, no.1 (August 1989), pp.37-46; and M.R. Dabros,"The Multinational Force and Observers: A New Experience in Peacekeeping for Canada," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 16, no.2 (Autumn 1986), pp.32-35.
32. *Ibid*., pp.24-25.
33. J.S. Bremmer, and M. Hache, "A Canadian Perspective on Peacekeeping," *FORUM: Journal of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute*, 8, no.3 (June 1993), pp.27-32.
34. Canada. Department of External Affairs [DEA], *News Release*, No.209 (1 September 1989), pp.1-2.
35. UN Security Council document S/20895.
36. Joly, "ONUCA," p.19.
37. DND. News Release, No.AFN 58/59 (30 November 1989), and No.AFN 59/89 (28 December 1989).
38. Child, *Central American Peace Process*, p.84.
39. R. Hill, and R. Purver, ed., *The Guide to Canadian Policies on Arms Control, Disarmament, Defence, and Conflict Resolution, 1990* (Toronto: Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, October 1990), pp.223-226.
40. *Ibid*., p.232.
41. *Ibid*., p.233.
42. The agreement was known as "Declaration of San Isidro de Coronado." See also UN Security Council document S/21019, annex.
43. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, p.85.
44. *Blue Helmets*, p.416.
45. S. MacDowall, "Rough Roads to Peace," *Sentinel*, 26, no.2 (March 1990), pp.3-4.
46. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, p.86; and *Blue Helmets*, pp.425-426.
47. Canada. House of Commons, SCEAIT, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, No.34, (14 December 1989), 34, pp.4-22.
48. Joly, "ONUCA," p.16.
49. *Ibid*., p.16.
50. *Ibid*., p.16.
51. Canada. Army Lessons Learned Information Warehouse. MARCOM notes regarding UN observation missions. In addition to naval patrols, RCN personnel were posted to inland observation posts and tasks. See also Joly, "ONUCA," p.16.
52. Canada. Commons Debates, 9 February 1990, pp.8126-8127.
53. Child, *The Central American Peace Process*, pp.88-93; and Hill, *et al*, *Guide to Canadian Policies*, pp.212-214.
54. Child, *Central American Peace Process*, p.89.
55. DND New Release, No.AFN 15/90 (22 March 1990).
56. *Blue Helmets*, pp.417-419.
57. Lewis Mackenzie, *Peacekeeper: The Road to Sarajevo* (Toronto: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1993), pp.84-86.
58. *Ibid*., p.86.
59. W. Callaghan, "Canadian Peacekeepers Reach Out", *Sentinel*, 26, no.6 (June-July 1990), 39; and DND. "Repatriation of Canadian Forces Air Resources and Observers from Central America", News Release, 75/90, 7 December 1990.
60. Mackenzie, *Peacekeeper*, p.89.
61. J.C. Gervais, "Land Force in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities – Part II", *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 22, no.2 (October 1992), pp.6-11.
62. *Ibid*, p.7.

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