

The “Cover-Up” story made news all over. The problem was that it wasn’t so.

Newsweek and the 14 Tanks

By Stephen P. Aubin

IF you were to believe *Newsweek* magazine, NATO aircraft in Operation Allied Force only managed to destroy 14 tanks, 18 armored personnel carriers, and 20 artillery pieces in some 2,000 actual strike missions flown over Kosovo.

In its May 15 edition, *Newsweek* proclaimed a “Kosovo Cover-Up,” billed by a promotional strip on the cover of the magazine as “The Truth About the Air War.” According to authors John Barry and Evan Thomas, the US Air Force had “suppressed” an after-action report that conflicted starkly with the strike assessment that was released by Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, last September.

A number of other publications picked up the revelation and piled on. As first copies of *Newsweek* hit the street May 7, the *New York Post* called the story a “bombshell.” On May 9, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* charged the Pentagon with “Flights of Fibbery.” A day later, the Charleston, S.C., *Post and Courier* took the



USAF photo

MEAT members check out a damaged tank in Kosovo. Their job, according to deputy team leader Lt. Col. Michael Duvall, was not to account for successful strikes but to investigate what equipment remained.

A Choice of Numbers: Serb Equipment Successfully Struck in Kosovo

	Tanks	Armored Personnel Carriers	Artillery
NATO assessment	93	153	389
Serb claims	13	6	27
<i>Newsweek</i> claims	14	18	20

Defense Department to task for “extravagant claims.” The *International Herald Tribune* on May 11 thundered, “After NATO’s Lies About Kosovo, It’s Time To Come Clean.” By May 12, the *New York Daily News* had weighed in, headlining the “costly scandal.”

On the broadcast side, “NBC Nightly News”—supplied with an early copy of the *Newsweek* story—was first out of the blocks with a May 7 report that uncritically presented the *Newsweek* claims, supported by a sound bite from co-author Thomas.

On “ABC World News Tonight” on May 8, Peter Jennings said it had been “learned,” with no mention of *Newsweek* as his source, that the Pentagon damage reports had been wrong. This, he pontificated, was “real confirmation” that “the first casualty of war is often the truth.” Perhaps Jennings should have said that the first casualties of journalism today frequently are truth and context. Unfortunately for ABC and other news organizations that jumped on this story, *Newsweek’s* reporting does not hold up.

Back Into “The Valley”

Not since CNN’s Tailwind fiasco—the mangled “Valley of Death” exposé that ignored inconvenient facts and insisted the US military had used nerve gas in Vietnam—has so much assertion about a military operation been based on so little evidence.

Newsweek’s “Cover-Up” thesis rested primarily on the so-called suppressed report, the existence of which initially was a mystery to Air Force officials closest to the Kosovo campaign analysis. In a May 8 session with Pentagon news correspondents, Air Force Brig. Gen. John Corley, who headed the studies and analysis team for US Air Forces in Europe, said he knew of “absolutely no report, no study that has been suppressed.”

It would later be determined that Barry and Thomas had obtained a working draft, labeled “NATO Confidential,” compiled by an element of the Munitions Effectiveness Assessment Team, or MEAT. The draft was entitled “Operation Allied Force: Munitions Effectiveness Assessment, Vol. II: Mobile Targets.” It was dated Aug. 3, 1999, and contained data

collected in July 1999 by the MEAT working group assigned to work on mobile targets.

The MEAT study comprised two parts—Vol. I and Vol. II. Both dealt exclusively with strikes in Kosovo, but they analyzed two different strike categories. Vol. I focused on fixed targets and is not germane to this controversy. Vol. II focused on mobile targets, the heart of the controversy. Raw data in Vol. I and Vol. II were later correlated with findings from other sources and fed into NATO’s “Kosovo Strike Assessment” and the US Air Force’s “Air War Over Serbia” study.

The documents with the raw data were classified, but they were not, as Barry and Thomas said, “buried by top military officers and Pentagon officials.” Those who had access to both working drafts—Vol. I and Vol. II—included not only the Air Force but also the Army, Navy, and General Accounting Office, a Congressional watchdog agency. Some information, including photographs and imagery from Vol. II, was publicly released by Clark in his Sept. 16 news conference.

The MEAT charter was to collect data on the ground for the purpose of studying the effectiveness of the munitions used during the campaign. For example, in the case of a bomb that was supposed to penetrate so many feet and explode, the team wanted to know if the fuze worked properly and how many feet of concrete were penetrated.

“Our job was not to account for successful strikes,” said Lt. Col. Michael Duvall, who was the MEAT’s deputy team leader. In a May 22 interview with *Air Force Magazine*, Duvall said, “Our job was to investigate what equipment was remaining from those strikes.”

The Key Word

The key word is “remaining.” After all, Serb mobile targets had been struck at different times during 78 days of air warfare. By early July 1999, when members of MEAT walked the ground and flew in helicopters looking for equipment, some strike sites were being visited for the first time in three months. The freshest of the sites was four weeks old.

By the time MEAT investigators arrived, Serb forces had taken away

whatever equipment was serviceable or salvageable, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery. What the team found in the “tank” category was 14 tanks plus 12 self-propelled artillery vehicles, which look like tanks and would have been reported as tanks in pilot mission reports. Those 26 “tanks” suffered catastrophic destruction and were abandoned by the Serbs.

What is clear is that the Serbs had plenty of time to remove and repair any equipment sustaining less drastic damage.

The MEAT ground survey was only one piece of the bomb damage assessment. As Corley explained, the process began with the pilots’ initial mission reports—1,955 of them. Since it is easy to be mistaken in the heat of combat, none of the pilot mission reports was automatically taken at face value. Before a strike was counted as a success, the results had to be corroborated by at least one other source. According to the Air Force, of the strikes eventually confirmed as successful, 55 percent were confirmed by one additional source and 45 percent were corroborated by two or more additional sources.

Beyond surveying the ground in Kosovo, the team went on to use other pieces of evidence such as national images, exploited U-2 aircraft film, unmanned aerial vehicles, interviews with the forward air controllers, and so on, Corley said. “Ultimately we combined all of those elements ... to come up with a full and accurate accounting of what really had or had not been successfully struck.”

Corley had 200 people working 24-hours-a-day for nine weeks before Clark briefed the international news media in September. By then, the team had documented successful strikes on 93 tanks, 153 armored personnel carriers, and 389 artillery pieces. If anything, Corley’s team was conservative in its approach. In the tank category alone, another 60 tanks were probably successfully struck, but that could not be confirmed by the tough NATO-USAF methodology.

Not surprisingly, these results disclosed in September scaled back the initial bomb damage assessments that previously had been announced by NATO and the Pentagon. (In June 1999, the Pentagon, responding to media demand for numbers, gave a



Some tanks suffered catastrophic damage, but the Serbs had time to remove and repair much of the less damaged equipment. Consequently, the ground study was only one piece of the bomb damage assessment.

tentative estimate of 120 tanks, 220 armored personnel carriers, and 450 artillery pieces destroyed.)

Newsweek was not the first to assert that NATO missed the bulk of its ground targets. That distinction belongs to Michael Evans, defense editor of *The Times* of London, whose dispatch from Pristina, Kosovo, dated June 24, 1999, was headlined, “NATO Dropped Thousands of Bombs on Dummy Roads, Bridges, and Soldiers ... and Hit Only 13 Real Serb Tanks.”

An Unimpeachable Source?

Evans’s source for the 13 tanks can be traced to Serbia’s 3rd Army commander, Lt. Gen. Nebojsa Pavkovic, who made the claim on June 16. But, as Clark pointed out in his Sept. 16 press conference, Pavkovic also claimed that Yugoslav air defense units shot down 47 NATO airplanes and four helicopters.

When the *Newsweek* article appeared, Evans picked up the chase again with gusto. In a May 11 article in *The Times*, he tied the “leaked report” cited by *Newsweek* to testimony before the House of Commons Defense Committee by Gen. Michael Jackson, a British officer who gained international attention after refusing an order from Clark to block Russian forces seeking to occupy the airport in Pristina. Jackson, Evans wrote, “confirmed yesterday that the reported destruction of large numbers of Serb tanks

by NATO bombers in Kosovo was exaggerated.”

However, Evans reported only part of what Jackson had said. According to a raw, unedited transcript provided on request to the Air Force Association by the Defense Committee, but which had not yet been publicly released, Jackson stated, “I think it is a matter of record that the actual damage done is rather less than was once estimated to have been done. We can play with the numbers forever. I am not privy to the information on which the numbers have been assembled. Certainly, when we entered Kosovo we did not have to clear away hundreds of burned out tank hulks.”

From that, Evans and *The Times* drew the headline, “General Admits NATO Exaggerated Bombing Success.”

What “Terror Bombing”?

Unfortunately, *Newsweek*’s article was not just about strike assessment numbers. Barry and Thomas also missed the basic context of the bombing campaign. Early in their exposé, they confused what turned out to be unprecedented precision in a limited bombing campaign—an exercise Clark now describes as “coercive diplomacy”—with “terror-bombing

civilians,” adding that “the surgical strike remains a mirage.”

Newsweek also repeated the accusation the Air Force was flying too high at 15,000 feet altitude and used elaborate “How It Works” graphics to illustrate the point.

In reality, Gen. John P. Jumper, who was commander of USAFE during Operation Allied Force, said there was nothing “ignoble” or ineffective about flying at 15,000 feet. At a seminar in Washington on April 13, he said that today’s technology makes it possible to avoid the hail of anti-aircraft artillery that downed thousands of airplanes in Vietnam. “At 15,000 feet, a laser bomb doesn’t care [about] the altitude from which it’s dropped, as long as it sees that little laser spot on the ground. And they do very well.” Jumper also said there was no categorical restriction to flying at 15,000 feet. Forward air controllers, for example, regularly flew much lower when necessary.

In the end, however, aircraft altitudes and the number of tanks destroyed were not the measure of success in the Kosovo air campaign. What mattered was the combined effects from the military, political, economic, and diplomatic actions taken by NATO. Aerospace power alone did not win the Kosovo military campaign, but it was the dominant feature of NATO’s exercise in coercive diplomacy, and it did provide NATO’s leaders with a range of options that would have been hard to imagine as recently as the Gulf War.

As for the tanks and armored personnel carriers, the Air Force had given *Newsweek* correspondent Barry a special interview with Corley and access to his documentation.

Corley’s team had pored over the ground survey data, classified imagery, cockpit videos, mission reports, human intelligence, and information from other sources.

Barry and Thomas chose to disregard that data and go instead with MEAT’s working draft of mobile target findings, backed up by innuendo from unnamed NATO sources, an unnamed CIA official, and an unnamed Pentagon source. ■

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