

The strange case of two Australian aid workers detained in Yugoslavia

Mike Head
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When Yugoslav authorities detained two Australian aid workers at the Croatian border on March 31, on suspicion of spying to aid the NATO bombing blitz, the affair rapidly became the subject of furious denunciations by the media and politicians in Australia, accompanied by frenzied diplomatic activity to secure their release.

Amid headlines such as "Spy outrage: Aussies guilty before a trial," Australian Prime Minister John Howard demanded the pair's immediate release. Former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, now chairman of CARE Australia, the agency that employed the two, flew to Geneva, Budapest and Moscow and eventually travelled to Belgrade as a Special Envoy in an effort to secure their return. Every conceivable dignitary was enlisted to add voices of protest, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Australian Governor-General William Deane, Greek government ministers and various Orthodox clergy.

The official and media furore intensified after one of the pair, former Army major Steve Pratt appeared on Yugoslav television on April 11 confessing to supplying intelligence information. "When I came to Yugoslavia I performed some intelligence tasks in this country, using the cover of CARE Australia. My concentration was on Kosovo and the effects of the bombing," Pratt said.

"I misused my Yugoslav citizen staff in the acquisition of information. I realise that damage was done to this country by these actions, for which I am frankly sorry. I always did and I still do condemn the bombing of this country."

As media reports conceded, Pratt bore no obvious signs of physical mistreatment and spoke calmly and clearly, beginning by stating his name and citizenship and listing the countries he had previously worked in--Yemen, Iraq and Rwanda.

RTS, the Serbian state television, announced: "In a coordinated action, Yugoslav security forces have broken up a network of agents headed by Major Steve Pratt. Under the cover of the humanitarian organisation CARE International, this person collected before [NATO] aggression on our country, intelligence data on military and police movements, and after the aggression, on the effects of the bombing."

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer described this charge as "simply preposterous". Newspaper columnists accused the Belgrade regime of "bully-boy tactics", "ghoulish" behaviour and international lawlessness. Without bothering to offer a skerrick of evidence, the *Australian's* international editor Greg Sheridan declared that the duo had suffered "an obviously brutal interrogation," adding that this was a "throwback to the crass communist behaviour of the Cold War".

The Milosevic regime was accused of attempting to use the two men

as hostages to blackmail the Australian government into dropping its support for the NATO air war.

This week a somewhat different picture began to emerge. With Malcolm Fraser in the lead, the language emanating from official and media sources became less categorical. Fraser returned to Australia empty-handed and admitted that Pratt and his assistant, Peter Wallace may have given the Yugoslav administration cause for suspecting their bona fides. Fraser claimed that Yugoslav officials might have misunderstood Pratt's military-style speech mannerisms and the extent of the records that he and Wallace were attempting to take out of the country.

"Steve has a military background," Fraser said. "Instead of saying, you know, 'Is this road clear, can we get our trucks through,' (he might say) 'get me some intelligence about that road.'" Fraser said the CARE workers might have been "naïve" to try to cross the border with CARE's extensive files, including "lengthy situation reports". He also admitted that the men, with whom he was granted a special access meeting in Belgrade, were in reasonable physical health.

A day after Fraser's comments, CARE Australia and CARE International officials effectively downgraded the campaign to end the pair's detention, foreshadowing a new "low-profile" phase. Graham Miller, CARE's chief in Switzerland, who accompanied Fraser to Belgrade, withdrew to his Geneva office. Antony Robbins of CARE International returned to London from Budapest, where Pratt's wife lives.

Where this affair will lead over coming weeks and months is not clear. But from the outset there were numerous inconsistencies in the official Australian story that Pratt and Wallace were purely innocent humanitarian workers assisting refugees in Serbia and Kosovo.

In the first place, the circumstances of their effort to flee Serbia via Lipovic on the Croatian border were dubious. With them they had a satellite phone and other telecommunications equipment, four laptop computers, extensive reports on the situation on the ground in Serbia and Kosovo and files of thousands of names and contact details, ostensibly of refugees. The full scope of these records has not been revealed.

Pratt and Wallace had set out at 6am from Belgrade's Hyatt Hotel in two UN vehicles, supposedly travelling to Montenegro by the most indirect and unfathomable route imaginable--via Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania. Along the way, after speaking to a *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter on a mobile phone, they changed their plans, seemingly in response to roadblocks, and set off for the Croatian border.

Until 1.30am the previous evening, Pratt and Wallace had been giving phone interviews to the Western media, including American

radio stations. They were in demand, because they had been in a unique situation to know first-hand about the flows of Kosovar refugees and the impact of the NATO bombing. Pratt, 49, had headed CARE's operations in Belgrade, while Wallace, 30, had been in charge of its work in Kosovo.

Hours before he left Belgrade, Pratt gave an interview to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in which he described himself as a "student of politics, of geo-politics". He claimed to have taken the job as CARE's director in Yugoslavia because, "The politics of the Balkans had long interested me. I wanted to know what it was about this place that made it so explosive." Wallace told the *Herald* he had gone to Yugoslavia at Pratt's invitation after they met and worked together in northern Iraq.

In other words, Pratt recruited Wallace. It soon became apparent that Pratt had an interesting history. For 23 years--almost his adult life--he had been an officer in the Australian Army, specialising in logistics. Upon leaving the military in 1992 he immediately turned up in one of the world's most strategically sensitive and volatile regions, working as a "logistics consultant" in Yemen, before joining CARE to work in Kurdistan in northern Iraq. There he was suddenly forced to leave the country, taking a CARE post in another hotspot, Rwanda, before arriving in the Balkans.

Pratt's mother, Mavis, told the *Sydney Sunday Telegraph* on April 11 that her son had supplied the UN with information about Iraqi forces during the Gulf War. "He was letting the UN know what Iraq was doing--he was observing--so Iraq put a price on his head and they had to get him out of there quickly."

A few days later it became known that Pratt's predecessor as head of CARE Australia in Yugoslavia was another military officer, former colonel Tony McGee. McGee admitted that two years ago he had been threatened with expulsion from Yugoslavia because the authorities suspected him of spying. McGee said CARE had a computer data base of thousands of refugees and an extensive information gathering network, but insisted these were used solely to monitor refugee movements. He also revealed that Pratt had been his deputy, first in Rwanda and then in Yugoslavia.

On April 16, some media outlets decided, belatedly, to unveil another peculiar feature of Pratt's biography. In 1989-90 he took leave from the Army to stand as the Liberal Party candidate for the Sydney seat of Banks in the federal election of 1990. He was associated with the most right-wing faction of the Liberal Party and closely aligned himself with John Howard, now the prime minister, who personally campaigned on Pratt's behalf. Pratt championed strong conservative views, advocating compulsory national military service for school leavers.

By this stage, certain newspaper pundits began to admit that Pratt would have difficulty in dispelling the impression that he was a spy. "As an Australian aid worker, Pratt is just the sort of person whom NATO intelligence services would approach to become an agent," wrote Brian Toohey, a veteran observer of the security agencies, in the *Sydney Sun-Herald* on April 18. Toohey noted that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the country's overseas spy agency, has previously acted for the US in countries where CIA agents might have difficulty operating, such as Chile before the 1973 US-backed military coup.

Like its American and British partners, ASIS is known to depend heavily on information gathered from agents, as well as full-time officers. To use everyday parlance, agents are part-time informers--people such as aid workers, business people, trade union officials and journalists, who are well placed to gather data in

sensitive locations. In the past ASIS agents have included a hotel owner in Dili, East Timor, on the eve of the 1975 Indonesian invasion, and UNSCOM weapons inspectors in Iraq. The American CIA has a well-documented record of using the US Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps as cover for its operations. Both the CIA and ASIS also use informers as "agents of influence," actively intervening into political developments or implementing provocations and other "dirty tricks" projects.

Fresh evidence of how Australian authorities use aid workers as informers emerged on April 23, when a former AusAID team leader in East Timor told the *Melbourne Age* he had warned embassy officials as early as June last year that the Indonesian army was arming and training pro-Jakarta militia groups. Lansell Taudevin, who administered a water and sanitation project from June 1996 to February this year, said it was made clear to him that he was expected to provide information on security to Australian officials in Jakarta.

He gave the *Age* copies of e-mail messages he sent to the embassy that included details of Indonesian troop arrivals and warnings of growing violence. He said AusAID pulled him out of East Timor because he was considered to be alarmist and biased toward the East Timorese secessionist movement.

As is to be expected, AusAID and the Howard government vehemently denied the evidence. An AusAID representative insisted that Taudevin was never asked to spy, while Downer's spokesman said it was a "completely nonsensical" suggestion. Nonetheless, Downer's staff member said it was "only natural" that embassy staff would talk to Australians in an effort to ascertain what was happening on the ground.

In Yugoslavia, for all the claims of high-tech surveillance capability, the US-NATO commanders have been unable to obtain a clear aerial or satellite view of the bombing damage and refugee and troop movements in the often mountainous, thickly forested terrain. Hence the need for observers on the ground.

The Yugoslav government has announced a judicial review into the case of Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace, and has allowed a lawyer to visit them. The full extent of the evidence against them may never be released. They may stand trial or a deal may be struck to release them. Nevertheless, one thing can be said with certainty. Whether they supplied information to Australian or NATO authorities or not, their activities gave the Yugoslav administration sufficient grounds to detain them.



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