

October 29, 2001

PUBLIC LIVES; Former Voice of Pentagon Now Speaks Out for Refugees

By ELIZABETH BECKER

DURING the last American air war, Kenneth Hogate Bacon was the voice of the Pentagon.

Throughout the bombing campaign over Kosovo and Yugoslavia, Mr. Bacon stood behind the Pentagon lectern daily delivering the news, both good and bad, in impeccable grammar, and becoming an internationally recognized American military figure with his bow tie and wire-rimmed glasses.

"People still stop me in airports and say, 'I know you -- you're Jamie Rubin,'" said Mr. Bacon, laughing because he is mistaken for the State Department's former spokesman.

That war set Mr. Bacon off in a new direction, one that has put him today in the position of arguing with the government over how to treat the victims of war and bombing campaigns. In his new life, he is the president of Refugees International, an advocacy group promoting support for refugees around the world.

It was on a trip to the Balkans in 1999 with William S. Cohen, then the defense secretary, that Mr. Bacon first visited a refugee camp.

"I had never seen refugees before, never fully appreciated the sheer magnitude of one million people leaving their homes and needing food, shelter and medical care and then one million people going back home after the war," he said. "This fascinated me. I knew it was rare for the world to help refugees so completely and I wondered if somebody could help give the same attention to the refugees in the Congo, Afghanistan and Sudan."

From a run-down town house off Dupont Circle in Washington, Mr. Bacon is finding out how difficult such a task is. Instead of a well-trained Pentagon staff, he directs 16 people. As a refugee advocate, he says the Pentagon should be able to clear air routes to transport desperately needed food and medical supplies into remote airstrips in Afghanistan.

"I accept that civilian casualties are inevitable in war," he said, "but the point I've tried to make is that whatever happens, the government doesn't want Afghanistan to be remembered for a winter where hundreds of thousands died who didn't need to, because we didn't send in food."

Mr. Bacon, a 57-year-old New Englander and the eldest of three brothers, was born into what he describes as a family of "comfortable means." His father was a professor at Amherst College in Massachusetts. He was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy and Amherst.

"Even blue-blooded WASP's were refugees at one time; mine came over from England in 1630, fleeing debts for all I know," he said.

He was an unfocused English major until he got a summer internship with the Chicago bureau of The Wall Street Journal. "From the first day, I knew this was what I wanted to do," he said. "It was so exciting to grab the paper with my first front-page story right off the press. It was, oddly enough, a story about how immigrants were integrating in America."

After marrying his college sweetheart, Darcy Wheeler, in 1966, Mr. Bacon received advanced degrees in journalism and business from Columbia University and served in the United States Army reserves.

In 1969 he joined the Wall Street Journal's Washington bureau, where he worked for 25 years as a reporter, columnist and editor. He and his wife settled down here and raised their two daughters, Kate, 30, and Sarah, 26.

From 1976 to 1980, Mr. Bacon covered the Pentagon, where he got to know a particularly thoughtful Defense Department official named William J. Perry.

They kept in touch and when President Clinton appointed Mr. Perry his second secretary of defense in 1994, Mr. Bacon got a phone call at The Wall Street Journal. He was asked if he would consider going to the other side of the great divide between the military and the media as the Pentagon spokesman.

Again, Mr. Bacon was persuaded by the thrill of a new assignment. "I liked Mr. Perry a lot," he said, "and it was an exciting time when the military was in the process of rewriting national security policy after the cold war."

Mr. Bacon was the spokesman for Mr. Perry and then for his successor, Mr. Cohen.

"Every journalist wants the best possible answer as quickly as possible," he said.

"They don't want to be told to wait. I knew my answers would almost write the whole story."

But he also laughs at reporters' persistence at asking impossible questions that could put military operations at risk. "I have a lot of sympathy for what the Pentagon briefers are going through now," he said.

DURING her first days as the new spokeswoman for the Pentagon, Victoria Clarke visited Mr. Bacon and asked him how she could keep the press and the public focused on the Pentagon's intended message.

"My answer was you can't," he said. "I told her, 'You're going to be judged on one standard alone: how well you respond in a disaster.'"

In the current disaster, in the wake of American warplanes striking Red Cross warehouses in Kabul for a second time and destroying thousands of tons of food and blankets, Mr. Bacon says Pentagon officials should review how they are getting across their message that America is a friend of the Afghan people.

"They are paying attention to the need for food and supplies," he said. "I wish they paid more attention and helped get more in."