

Waging Peace in Bosnia

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During his six months' service with the European Community Monitoring Mission in the former Yugoslavia, the author witnessed the catastrophe that is overwhelming this lovely land and its people.

In 25 years as a Canadian naval officer, I never dreamed that my first wartime command would be a white four-wheel drive vehicle, flying the flag of the European Community and manned by a Greek monitor, a French driver, and a Montenegrin interpreter. A naval career is varied and unpredictable, if nothing else.

Canada is a member of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, with unmatched experience in peacekeeping. Consequently, when an invitation to be part of the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) in the former Yugoslavia was extended, it willingly was accepted, well before the later commitment of more than 2,000 troops to the U.N. Protection Force. Our small ECMM contingent of 12 Canadians included infantry, fighter pilots, and naval line and engineering officers, but during ECMM service, we were temporary civilian diplomats, dressed entirely in white and unarmed, except for our diplomatic passports and our wits.

Our primary mission was to monitor compliance with agreements between the conflicting parties. Our secondary focus was monitoring adherence to international humanitarian law. In practice, we not only observed and reported, we also did whatever we could to negotiate, influence, assist, cajole, or comfort, as the circumstances dictated—especially in areas where U.N. forces or humanitarian agencies were absent, thinly spread, or restricted. Although officially discouraged from getting too distracted by humanitarian work, we tended to interpret the guidelines loosely. When you are surrounded by inhumanity and intolerance, assisting the hopeless helps keep things in perspective.

SYDNEY (P. CHAUVEL)



Ethnic Cleansing

We had been busy moving our base of operations from southern Croatia into neighboring Montenegro when disturbing reports began circulating. Several thousand Muslim Slavs in the adjacent self-styled "Serb Republic" of Bosnia and Hercegovina—many already refugees—allegedly were being threatened and ordered out. The deadline reportedly being given was St. Sava's Day, festival of the Serb patron saint.

In the past we had traveled to that area from our base in Croatia whenever possible, but always under strict limitations. Before the war it would have been a quick, direct drive on a good road, but now there was an intervening active front. We would have to cross from Croatia

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into Montenegro, then travel by mountain roads—totally unsuitable for the fainthearted—into Hercegovina.

Negotiating a cease-fire to cross the front directly was out of the question. Croatia was defying the U.N. Security Council by having its troops inside Bosnia and Hercegovina. From Croatia's perspective, it was essential to extend a buffer zone well inland from the narrow south Dalmatian coast around Dubrovnik, but it was not about to spoil a carefully nurtured underdog image by letting international observers confirm the presence of Croatian Army units beyond its own border. In addition, Croatia refused to talk to the Bosnian Serb Army, which it saw as a paramilitary tool of an illegal and unrecognized regime.

For their part, the Bosnian Serbs had little affection for representatives of a European Community that was claiming impartiality on one hand and enforcing sanctions against Yugoslavia on the other. They were understandably annoyed that the Western press seemed to see nothing right in Serb actions and nothing wrong in Croat and Muslim actions. Shuttleing between the combatants, we earned those diplomatic passports. We sometimes saw being equally disliked by all sides as a measure of our success.

As the rumors of ethnic cleansing intensified, we alerted ECMM headquarters and other international agencies, while arranging for clearance to enter Hercegovina and setting up an appointment with the authorities. We finally were able to make the stomach-knotting journey the morning after St. Sava's day, and we arrived to find our worst fears confirmed. Smoke was rising from the ruins of the demolished mosque. At the local Red Cross office, we were met by distraught Muslims, possessions in hand, pleading for transport out. The sound of small-arms fire was coming from within the walls of the old town. The fear was palpable. What it must have been like to be Muslim in such circumstances defies imagination.

The mayor was not available at the agreed time, reportedly delayed at another meeting "addressing" the crisis. This was lucky, we were told, because Croatian artillery shells had just impacted two kilometers west of the town. Given the delay, we and the U.N. military observers

who had joined us were asked to inspect this evidence of indiscriminate Croatian shelling. Because we could go nowhere unescorted, it was a choice between that and standing uselessly in a parking lot, so we agreed. When we arrived, a scruffy soldier reported that the shells actually had landed well up the hillside, inaccessible except by a long climb on foot. We could hear gunfire, but it was several miles away, where we knew the front to be. We had been led away to minimize our observation in town. Still, that tactic itself was revealing.

The meeting with the mayor, when it finally occurred, was not cordial. According to the mayor, a few Muslims wanted to leave for unknown reasons. According to the police chief, they were under the full protection of the law. According to the deputy Corps commander, many were volunteers in the Bosnian Serb Army. No, we could not patrol freely. The presence of many Bosnian Serb Army soldiers, angry at the ECMM, meant that our safety could not be guaranteed. Yes, we were welcome to come back as frequently as we wished (with advance notice, of course). No, there was no ethnic cleansing. Muslims were valued members of the community, but naturally those who wished to go were free to do so. Sadly, they all confirmed our query about a young Serb man who had been fatally beaten while attempting to help a Muslim. They did not mention that this had happened in broad daylight, in sight of the police station. He had been an example to others.

We pointed out that our organization and the rest of the international community, up to and including the highest levels, were following developments closely. We also

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noted that this was a chance to stop complaining about Western misconceptions about Serbs and prove that tolerance was still alive here, in the last part of Eastern Hercegovina still inhabited by significant numbers of Muslims. As we drove away to report our findings and plan our next move, our young interpreter remained silent for a long time. "I am so ashamed of my own people," she said simply as we climbed back into the dusky Montenegrin mountains.

With limited resources, a wide range of issues to track, and a huge area to cover, this was not the only issue on our schedule. Nonetheless, over the next few weeks we managed to keep a presence in Hercegovina, in cooperation with U.N. military observers, the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, and the International Red Cross. When one segment of a community acquiesces or participates in driving out another, there is no way to force the two parties together, no way to police every household. The only weapons available to outsiders are presence and influence.

We kept pressure on the mayor and the army. We drove to remote corners of Montenegro, tracking down

the displaced refugees to establish their numbers, to get their story, and to report on their condition. They often lived in squalor: crammed into makeshift quarters in hotels, schools, or mosques, sometimes 10 or 12 to a small hotel room, sometimes with one toilet servicing a hundred people. Good people in Montenegro—Serb as well as Muslim—struggled to help those who had nothing but a suit-

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case and the clothes on their back, while themselves coping with the effects of sanctions. Many took strangers into their homes despite the hardship, but most refugees had to camp in public buildings or in commandeered hotels.

Still there was no rest. Muslim refugees in one town near the Albanian border were bivouacked in the local school and mosque. Montenegrans Serb authorities finally said they had to leave the school because it would be wrong to interrupt the education of the children. Montenegrans Muslims said they had to leave the mosque because it would be wrong to interrupt the proper observance of Ramadan. More than 300 people boarded buses and moved on. In all, 3,500 people were threatened into abandoning their homes and the possessions of a lifetime, but here at least, they left with their lives, families, and a suitcase each. By the standards of a brutal war, it was a sadly ambiguous achievement.

Ethnic cleansing is not a Serb phenomenon. In the midst of the Muslim exodus, the Bosnian Serb Army asked for an urgent meeting. The Bosnian "Croatian Council of Defense" allegedly had rounded up a group of elderly Serbs in Mostar and forced them across the front—two mine fields included—to join their fellow Serbs on the other side. It sounded like a fabrication to divert attention from the Muslims' plight, but sure enough, we arrived to find a dozen exhausted victims.

Resisting an outside attempt to turn the investigation into a media event, we heard their story in private. They told of being rounded up at noon and loaded into a van in which they spent the afternoon being driven about—at one point being left in the vehicle during an artillery attack, while their abductors covered them with rifles from shelter. As evening fell, they were delivered to the front. One man was given a large white flag and told to lead the group across Serb lines. Two women who had been taken while their husbands were not home pleaded to stay until they could be reunited. The others pleaded that if they advanced in the dark, the Serb side would shoot. They reported being told, "If they don't, we will."

By the time they reached the safety of Serb positions late that night, a fragile looking woman in her eighties had been shot in the leg and carried for several miles by her daughter. The two women who had been separated from their husbands were last seen lying on the road during a flurry of gunfire. No one dared to go back to help. No one could say which side did the shooting.

We relayed the details to the ECMM team on the Bos-

ian Croat side. They pursued the issue aggressively, confirmed the story, and established that, mercifully, one of the two stragglers had survived. It was not difficult to identify those responsible to the Croat authorities, but whether the guilty parties acted with official blessing was uncertain. Whether they have been brought to justice I do not know. On the scale of evil in Bosnia and Hercegovina, this was just another minor bit of inhumanity.

Presence and influence took many forms: in Croatia it was showing support to the Serb minority and visiting frequently to help deter extremist violence; in Montenegro it was visiting Muslim and Croat refugees and bringing news of relatives and friends. We visited minority villages of all three parties, usually occupied only by the elderly, sometimes bringing letters and parcels on behalf of the Red Cross or verbal greetings from relatives on the other side of the line. We stopped in cafes or local gathering spots everywhere we traveled to learn attitudes and the chronic rumors that are the plague of Balkan conflict. People who were hostile at the beginning of conversations would sometimes end thoughtfully, having been exposed to their only alternative to official propaganda.

As representatives of the European Community, we would point out that Western Europe had been through

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this 50 years before, that the Dutch, for example, had every reason to hate Germans as much as one Balkan faction hated another, but that Europeans had made the choice to live together in peace. This was no official "hearts and minds" campaign. It was simply an expression of what was in our hearts and our minds as we shared this catastrophe overwhelming a lovely land and people.

Cease-Fires

Whenever the term "cease-fire" is used in press reports on this war, it usually is followed by a remark that it was violated before the ink dried on the agreement. By Western standards this is true. In the Balkan context it is not necessarily so. With the exception of the remaining elements of the old Yugoslav Army, the armies consist mostly of poorly disciplined, provincially oriented, but unquestionably brave reservists. The Croatian Army has been making strenuous attempts to become professional, but it has a long way to go. The curfew in Croatia's historic city of Dubrovnik was lifted for the first time on Christmas Eve 1992, so that the faithful could go to Mass. By the time priests were performing rituals of peace and goodwill, the streets sounded like a battle zone, as drunken or undisciplined soldiers discharged rifles, machine guns, and even grenades in the streets.

We helped to arrange a Christmas cease-fire on the front, to span the three-week period from Croat Roman Catholic Christmas Eve to Serb Orthodox New Year's Day. The Serbs made the initial offer, which the ECMM team relayed to a willing Croatian Army. Everyone needed

a morale boost, as the hills beyond Dubrovnik can be bitterly cold and miserable at that time of year. The truce began at noon on 24 December. By the morning of the 25th, both sides were denouncing violations by the other.

Surprisingly, the Bosnian Serbs finally responded to our challenge to let us up to the front to see for ourselves. After a few silent moments at the first observation point, there was a burst of machine gun fire to the left. A few minutes later there was a heavier explosion and a column of smoke to the right. The pattern continued throughout the afternoon.

What became obvious was that we were not witnessing a battle, but random bursts along the length of the front. It was less active than Christmas Eve in the streets of Dubrovnik. We pressed the Serbs, and later the Croats, on the point. Both reluctantly admitted that they did not really see these things as violations. Bored young men were amusing themselves, or keeping the opposition alert, with what my Dutch colleague dubbed "teasing fire." From then on, we reported such truces as "Balkan Cease-Fires" and registered violations only when one side or the other tried to gain ground or reinforce.

The Lessons

The Balkan conflict does not fit neatly into a "good guy, bad guy" mold. It is not even a simple, three-way Serb-Croat-Muslim conflict. Serbs in Montenegro, in Bosnia and Hercegovina, in the Krajina part of Croatia, and in Serbia itself are not necessarily responding to the same imperatives. The ethnic cleansing by Serbs in Hercegovina created a major refugee problem for the Serbs of Montenegro.

Furthermore, brutality is by no means a Serb monopoly. Cries of "genocide against the Serbs" are genuinely expressed by those who still remember their own World War II "Holocaust" under a fascist Croat regime whose symbols and rhetoric have surfaced again. Assurances that Croatia is a modern European state, committed to equality for all, ring hollow to Serbs dismissed from responsible positions, homeless after their houses have been blown up, or confronting the bureaucratic inertia facing those who cannot prove themselves pure Croat.

As for military lessons, most simply reinforce the old principles. The first priority, as always, must be to define the aim. Simply stated, the aim is peace. The military question then becomes whether that peace is imposed

or voluntary. Imposed, it is at best an interim solution. Unless it is a stepping stone to something permanent and voluntary, it is an open-ended, unlimited-liability undertaking, as Cyprus and Northern Ireland illustrate. In the former Yugoslavia, although we pushed our moral authority to the limit, we never forgot that we were there because we were invited—partly because all sides wanted to gain international credibility, partly because all sides wanted to use us to their advantage, and partly because, sooner or later, a means of sharing the region in peace must be found.

Peace must be a choice of the combatants. Anything else will, at worst, unite the parties against foreign interference and, at best, result in all sides finding ways to circumvent a foreign solution. Germany, Italy, Albania, Bulgaria, and Hungary all occupied Yugoslavia in World War II, but the bulk of fighting by Yugoslav resistance movements was against each other: Croat Ustasha against Serb Chetniks against Communist Partisans. The legacy of brutality in that conflict, still within living memory, adds fuel to the conflict still. An advocate of imposed solutions would be negligent in failing to study the history.

No peace can be achieved cost-free. Only on the ground can one learn the dynamics, share the hardships, master the intricacies, establish presence, react to subtleties, and impose moral and physical authority. Threatening to bomb without a matching commitment on the ground is a sure way to reinforce the stubbornness of a martial people with a well-developed martyr complex. Threatening without acting is worse. In either case, life becomes more difficult for those committed ashore.

The hard truth is that military personnel risk being wounded and killed in waging peace as much as in waging war. Peace must ultimately be made on the ground. It must be a choice by the combatants, and it must be supported by those with control over the firepower. They in turn will be influenced only by outsiders who understand the problem, share the risks, have a clear vision of the way out of the morass, and who have earned their trust and respect. There is no "royal road," no painless path, to peace.

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"Pease Porridge Hot, Pease Porridge Cold . . ."

Two men caught in the act of "going around the bend" for a second ration were given extra duty in the galley. To get even, they found the chief cook's sea boots and filled them with the cold porridge everybody complained about. But, to their disappointment, the chief later acted as if nothing had happened.

Weeks slipped by and then, during a run ashore, the culprits met the chief cook face to face. Emboldened by a few drinks, one asked him how he liked his boots.

"How did you like your porridge the next day?" he replied.

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