

In harm's way

Peter Vaughan, MD

It was a relatively quiet day, and I was standing outside the Kosovo hospital in Sarajevo. The occasional artillery shell exploded in the hills surrounding the city, and the smell of corpses was in the air. The decaying remains of a country reek like nothing else.

It was the fall of 1994, and I was a long way from Guelph, Ont. I had been recalled for 5 weeks of active duty with the air force to be part of a United Nations humanitarian mission in the former Yugoslavia. (After leaving the military in 1986 I had stayed in the supplementary ready reserve, which at the time comprised former regular force personnel who had agreed to be recalled if needed.)

I was supposed to have been part of a mission to Rwanda during that summer of bungled diplomacy, but things began heating up again in the Balkans. I agreed to go without really thinking about the implications or the risks. At a briefing we were asked to complete a form that could help identify us in case of capture. "Wait a minute," said a paramedic. "I thought we were on a humanitarian mission." It seems that it was open season on UN personnel. Of course, to be captured you have to survive. Everyone laughed. On the form I wrote my wife's name, our cat's name, the name of my favourite car, and my shoe size. I reflected on my shoe size, and on whether I should put down the metric size too. A military Airbus flew us to our staging base in Ancona, Italy; from there we would fly sorties to Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Split in Croatia.

Our mission had a code name, Operation Air Bridge. During my stint I flew aboard Canadian and Royal Air Force Hercules transports. We took food and medical supplies into Sarajevo and evacuated the sick and wounded on return flights. Canada supplied the medevac team, which included myself and a military nurse and paramedic, but even after 11 years in practice, including emergency room work, I was not prepared for Sarajevo's living ghosts.

On the flights to Sarajevo I couldn't see our fighter escorts, but I could hear them chattering away on their radios about hostile MIGs — they called them "chicks" — in our area. Once we crossed the Dalmatian coast we never knew if a surface-to-air missile was waiting to provide a fiery CNN kind of death. The final descent involved the ritual donning of a flak jacket and blue helmet. The lumbering Hercules did its version of an aerobatic combat manoeuvre before plunging straight down to the runway and the war's front line. The pilots released flares and metallic chaff to help evade surface-to-air missiles, but nobody really believed this would do any good. The flights reminded me of WW II movies, and I was one of the actors.

Minutes from touchdown on one of these flights, we heard "Code Red!" Shots had been fired on the runway in Sarajevo, and the mission was aborted. Still on board were two Sarajevans: a young man in his late teens and his mother. He had a penetrating brain injury and had been taken out for neurosurgery in Italy. They were crying, upset over the aborted landing. The young man's eyes, enormous with fear, stared at me. At that moment I understood that the war's grim voodoo was more than just a matter of staying alive; it was choosing where you want to die.

When we did manage to land we faced a mad rush to get our patients and take off again. I would shudder as our armoured car lurched and turned toward the hospital on the route called "Snipers' Alley." Everyone ran as if late for an appointment. There was a feeling of being



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Dr. Peter Vaughan stands beside bullet-scarred ambulance at the Kosovo hospital



watched. I think I was the only one who noticed the calm, eerie silence, the eye of the storm.

The front lines of this war were to my immediate right, where snipers used powerful, modern rifles with sophisticated sights to shoot old men, women and children. Even more appalling was the information that one of the snipers was allegedly a former member of the Bulgarian Olympic rifle team, a woman now working as a mercenary. Rumour had it that the snipers were paid in deutsche marks — 200 per child, 400 per adult, 600 per UN representative and 800 per reporter. A Canadian doctor had to be worth at least 700 marks, but that's before the clawback.

In October, the river in Sarajevo runs a muddy red. It was on a bridge crossing this river on the morning of June 28, 1914, that a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip shot the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. As in a dream I saw the royal chauffeur come to a dead stop at the bridge exactly in front of the young assassin and Princip firing into the archduke's heart — the shot that started WWI. Its ricochet is still heard today.

In Sarajevo, history means flesh and blood. A little over a decade ago the Olympic games symbolized a new era of peaceful national pride, but in the fall of 1994 it was not even safe to bury the dead: corpses still complicate nationalism. We can learn from recent Balkan history. Canadian indifference — the smug, arrogant belief that it can't happen here — worries me. Looking out the window of the armoured car, I wondered how many Yugoslavs once believed the same thing.

The inbound flights provided plenty of time to think; on the way back we'd be busy with our patients. There might be 5 or 6, or there could be 25. I learned not to place too much faith in the patient-assessment faxes from Geneva. The burly French Foreign Legionnaire smiled as he stamped my passport in Sarajevo. The "official" stamp on my green passport read: "Maybe Airlines," as in maybe get in — maybe get out. Black humour from the edge.

The ambulance outside the Kosovo hospital had so many bullet holes through its windshield it could be a sieve for straining souls. The rifle-toting soldiers hanging around the emergency-room door had a carrion stench to them. "It is very difficult," another UN doctor told me, "to tell someone who is carrying a gun that you will not take his child out of the country." I got the message.

In the hospital's burn unit a brother and sister desperately clung to life. Their home had been blown up by a mortar shell that punctured a gas tank. Their grandmother was killed and the 12-year-old boy had burns over 60% of his body. His 10-year-old sister had burns over more than half of her body and internal bleeding that required emergency abdominal surgery and resection of a portion of her small bowel. Sterile conditions were nonexistent. The girl died the next day.

Outside the hospital, looking down on the ruins of the

Olympic stadium where athletes once stood triumphant, death stood watch over a massive cemetery, a grisly reminder of the human cost of war.

Psychiatric patients wandered the streets without treatment. One thin man in dirty clothes came up to me, told a rather sad joke and asked for money. Just then the ground trembled with artillery rounds. I studied a face that had become inured to the sounds of war. He smiled and disappeared behind the ruins of a building, clutching the American dollar I put in his hand.

Farther up the valley a river wound its serpentine course to the mountains, where salmon spawn: in different times I would have been tempted to go fishing. But in Sarajevo, a city that stands among rushing rivers, old buildings and a heritage centuries old, there was no time for that.

International humanitarian crises come and go, thrown out and replaced by newer cauldrons of suffering in exotic locations. If information is power, it is also a protector of people and empires. The hope is that if people see the carnage of war on television, they will influence their governments to intervene on behalf of those doing the suffering. Hope is all these people have, but many of the doctors and people I spoke with had given up on that, too.

There was a sad irony to our mission. We brought food and medicine, only to have it hijacked on the road outside the airport. Many of the crew had been there before, and there was a sense of frustration that our humanitarian mission was only prolonging the war. Morale was low.

Eventually, it began to feel like the movie *Groundhog Day*: every morning we began to relive the same day. Every day I fumbled with the same list of Serb-Croat phrases. *Boli me ovde* — I have pain. *Dacu vam injekciju* — I am going to give an injection.

When my mostly empty Airbus finally arrived back in Trenton, I was very glad to be back in Canada, to be a civilian again. It felt alien wearing a military flying suit at the gas station along the 401, although I still had two military things left to do: return my equipment and write a final report.

Back in the office the following Monday, everything was the same except me. With my wife's help, I quickly adjusted to civilian life again.

A lot of people have asked why I left the safety and security of my family practice to go to war. I reply with a quote from *King Henry V*:

I think it is in Macedon where Alexander is born. I tell you, Captain, if you look in the maps of the world, I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon: there is also moreover a river at Monmouth: it is called Wye at Monmouth; but it is out of my brains what is the name of the other river; but 'tis all one, 'tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmon in both.

Indeed, there are salmon in our rivers too. ?