

Points of View

An Open Letter from Bosnia-Herzegovina *Public architect trades army dress uniform for fatigues and flak vest*

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It's strange to travel into a foreign country without showing a passport or stopping at a border crossing. What's more, the military identification, documentation, international badge, and the danger pay scale all reinforced in my mind the unusual circumstances in which I had landed last summer when my work as a civilian architect with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took me to the Balkans. I served as deputy director of the Directorate of Public Works with the NATO/SFOR peacekeepers in Bosnia-Herzegovina and handled work for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Hungary.

I lived and worked at Camp Eagle, a multinational base camp and the headquarters for the U.S. Army in Bosnia near Dubrave Gornje, a village of about 1,000 people situated 30 minutes south, by car, from the country's fourth largest town, Tuzla. Our center of operations was a former Yugoslav National Army base. The existing buildings were substantial and well-constructed. Signs warning of mines dissuaded people from investigating the overgrown and wooded areas off to the side of the roads, even as they reminded me of why I was there. Large trees and sloping hills softened the installation's appearance despite the frequency of armored vehicles traversing the roads and helicopters regularly patrolling low along the boundaries.

After years of designing affordable housing and basic modular units, I lived inside one: an 8-foot by 24-foot metal shipping container. It was comfortable, but basic. The walls and ceiling were white metal with two bright

fluorescent fixtures overhead and conduit running along the walls and ceiling.

Even as a civilian, I was required to wear the U.S. Army battlefield camouflaged uniform and combat boots, rather than the regular uniform of trousers, green shirt, and tie to work, meetings, and meals. My flak vest and Kevlar helmet sat next to my desk and were required for any travel.

Camp Eagle

The flight into the country on a C-130 military troop transport aircraft offered the first indication that I should prepare myself for an arduous tour of duty and a unique experience. There were no passenger seats; only webbed benches and canvas straps. The crew chief advised us that the pilot would take evasive action if he received report of a threat at our destination. He said if we saw the crew don their helmets, we should be sure to have our seat belts securely fastened. Earplugs abated the engines' loud roar. The warnings proved pertinent as we approached our destination—the pilot began a rapid descent and then followed the valley, flying the heavy multi-engine propjet just above the trees. The plane banked sharply, swerving through the wooded hillsides at high speed. Later, I learned that it had been a combat approach to evade being shot.

Our office sat at the edge or "the wire" of the camp, where concertina wire and concrete barriers formed the perimeter. A window allowed me to hear the occasional rooster call, the infrequent vehicular traffic, and the call to prayer from the numerous mosques five times a day. Through its sniper

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Buildings in Bosnia show the effects of years of ethnic fighting.



The author, pictured at his base at Camp Eagle, headquarters for the U.S. Army in Bosnia.



Rough concrete frames are all that remain of most homes in Bosnia, the author reports.

Points of View



Fighting in the Balkans took its toll on all segments of society.

administrative personnel. Six American soldiers also served as part of the organization. We were required to clear projects in overgrown, wooded or unbuilt areas of possible mines and unexploded ordnance. This task necessitated extensive coordination with the demining team, military police, communications group, safety office, nearby occupants, and medical organizations about notifications, alternate vehicle traffic routes, aircraft overflights, and evacuations. We completed a number of clearing operations and prepared for others.

Weapons everywhere

Nearly everyone carried a weapon. Enlisted soldiers slung rifles over their backs and the officers carried holstered pistols on their web belts. Walking down the aisles between tables in the dining hall proved difficult, because machine guns were laid on the floor (they were not allowed on the tables). At the dental clinic, I sat in the dentist's chair while two machine guns hung on the wall next to me. In the fitness center, soldiers placed pistols and rifles next to the exercise machines.

Given this atmosphere, it wasn't surprising that one of my first projects was to create additional space to store guns in an arms room. The existing arms room was connected with the mailroom. It was a practical adjacency because they both contained secure items, but it is an unusual U.S. Postal Service arrangement to have the M-16s stored next to the mailroom. While inspecting it one afternoon, the mail/arms room clerk told me about the firing range on the base.

screen, I could see houses on the other side of the road. Many evenings the light cast a beautiful orange glow on buildings and trees. Long shadows filled in between strong colors. I would have liked to walk along streets, homes, and shops, but could only gaze through the fence at the activity outside the camp. In the evenings the music from a café across the street kept me company while I worked at my desk.

I supervised 10 Bosnian architects, engineers, and adminis-

After living among so many weapons, it was good to get a hands-on sense of them and to shoot them at the indoor range, using carbon dioxide cartridges firing at a simulation screen.

Danger zone?

It was—and still is—difficult to gauge the level of safety or danger. The U.S. government considers it a combat zone and we received danger pay. We took extensive measures for protection and needed special approval to leave the camp. Throughout Bosnia, hundreds of weapons and caches continued to be discovered regularly, and reports of grenade or other explosions outside the camp occurred almost weekly. On the other hand, there was no open fighting and the NATO/SFOR soldiers were welcome in town.

After less than a week in the country, I had traveled out from "the wire" for a meeting with a large American company building projects there and in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Its offices were about a 45-minute drive south next to a large UN compound. The scenery along the way was less developed and poorer than I remember Yugoslavia from working in the country more than two decades ago. We noted that many small shops and stores still open at 8:30 Sunday evening. Our interpreter explained that shop owners work every day, and as long as possible, to earn what they could. We also saw many graveyards along the way, with white Muslim tombstones reflecting brightly in the last light of the day.

On my second Sunday after arriving in the base, we drove into the Republika Serpska to a Russian base. This is the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina and not the Republic of Serbia, a part of the country of Yugoslavia. A faded Russian flag flew over the small base. While Eagle Base housed a few thousand people, this one only has a small number of Americans and probably fewer than 80 Russians.

Next to the camp is what is said to be the most polluting power plant in Europe. The nearby town is Ugljevik and the base is named



A building in shambles, an all too familiar sight in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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Points of View



The author's center of operations was a former Yugoslav National Army base. Signs warning of mines dissuaded people from investigating the overgrown and wooded areas off to the side of the roads, even as they reminded the author why he was there.

Camp Ugly. It was.

We went there to inspect a plywood dining facility that was sliding into the river Modran. We crossed the previous front lines as we drove over the hills. Nearly all of the houses on the Bosnian side had been destroyed, and rough concrete frames were all that remained of most homes. In the countryside, houses had provided the sole source of shelter. The Serbs knew this and had shelled them. The Bosnians feared returning because of the threat of future fighting in a place so close to the border, as well as mines that still lay in the land.

Preparing to leave

The chaplain organized a trip to Camp Jezevac, a refugee camp about 20 kilometers southwest of Eagle Base, to share pizza with elementary school students for an end-of-year party. The children were friendly and curious. They wondered why we hadn't brought cevapcici, a food familiar to them. Many wrapped their pizza in napkins and saved it, probably to share with their siblings and mothers at home.

As I looked forward to reuniting with my wife and sons in Germany, my time in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended with the same type of uncertainty with which it began. It was difficult to know when to tell my family to meet me in Europe. The Serbian border sits not far from the eastern end of the runway, and random variations were used in the flight operations to protect our security. But all in all, I appreciated the opportunity to work with the soldiers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who are part of such an important and beneficial U.S. military mission. They are helping to maintain peace and security in a part of the world that badly needs this support.