

Compassionate Canucks: Bosnia's "Mars Bar" Brigade

Timothy J. Dunne

Occasionally, an event happens that appears to be almost trivial, with not much to set it apart from the environment in which it happens. It almost fails to emerge above the chaos and the confusion that surrounds it. It's often easy to miss amid the clutter, but when you pause to look at it, its significance strikes you with a profundity that defies its first appearance.

In September 1995, I arrived in Zagreb, Croatia, as the senior public affairs officer of the Canadian Contingent to the United Nations Peace Force in the Balkans. When I recovered from jet lag and completed the military's arrival procedures, called *in-routine* - completing documentation, receiving United Nations identification, and being assigned living accommodations -- I arranged to visit the other Canadian public affairs officers assigned to our two battle groups.

Within two weeks, I accompanied a Canadian military vehicle convoy from our logistics battalion in Primosten, on the Adriatic Coast, to Visoko, Bosnia Herzegovina. My colleague, the Canadian public affairs officer assigned to the Canadian battle group, and I spent a week together and traveled throughout the Canadian area of responsibility, or AOR. One morning, we went to a forward operating base at Kiseljak, and joined several other Canadians from the *Cinquième Régiment d'artillerie légère du Canada*, from Valcartier, QC. The officer in charge, Captain François Giroux, took me to the small tuck shop at the Canadian outpost where he and other members of his team bought all the Mars bars that were available. The person serving at the tuck shop told me quietly that the shop does a phenomenal business in candy bars.

We drove through a Srbskan (Bosnian Serb) checkpoint. The soldier checked our identification cards and waved us through with a smile. Within a few minutes we arrived at Drin to visit the local infirmary for some 400 mentally challenged people, of all ages. The young captain quietly said, "Be prepared to cry a little."

The hospital was the focus of some brief Canadian television coverage in the early 1990s, when the Bosnian battle line - the Inter Ethnic Line of Conflict - passed through the area, forcing the staff to flee, leaving the patients to fend for themselves. The Canadian troops at Visoko discovered their plight during a patrol. They went to the patients' rescue, often under sniper fire, and took them back to the hospital.

Our troops buried 25 of the children who were killed before they could be rescued. They were given individual graves behind the hospital, each one marked with an anonymous metal peg since no one knew their names. These children went to their God without anyone knowing who they were.

We visited the directrice of the infirmary who served us thick Bosnian coffee and spoke to us through an interpreter. She spoke of the Canadian rescue, of the bravery of the soldiers, and how they stayed until the staff returned to resume their responsibilities. The Canadians cut firewood, swept floors, cooked, and changed

diapers until they were relieved. The directrice spoke of the battle group's continuing relationship with the children of the infirmary. Canadian troops who deployed to the Balkans worked seven-day weeks, and were given several "72-hour passes," or long weekends, during their six-month tour. Many of the troops spent their rare long weekends at the infirmary, cutting wood, cooking and doing laundry for these same patients, and often simply playing soccer with the kids, and keeping them company. When she spoke of these kind-hearted soldiers, she fixed me with her gaze and called them, in English, "My Canadians."

Then we toured the infirmary and saw people teaching children's classes, nurses caring for the ill and infirmed, and people cleaning. Among them were Canadian soldiers. As we walked through the facility, we were constantly swarmed by children demanding candy. It took no time to be depleted of our supply of Mars bars. These children who were so badly abused by others in military uniforms were able to recognize the uniform and the Canadian flag that each soldier wears on his and her left shoulder as different, and non-threatening.

As we continued the tour, I saw sights that moved me. There was a four-month old son of two patients. No one knew if the boy also was handicapped. He was too young to assess. I picked him up and carried him with me for the rest of the visit and reluctantly passed him back. His smile and good nature hinted that he would have no difficulty when he would be assessed.

We turned into another ward with about 30 young children with various levels of disabilities. As soon as Captain Giroux spoke I heard squeals coming from one of the beds to the right. A young girl, about six or seven years old, was making a lot of noise, bringing smiles to the nurses and their assistants when they saw the captain. He went right to her and started to speak with her.

She was completely paralyzed, her body was straight and her head was locked to the right. He stroked her hair and rubbed her cheeks, and said to me, "This is my girlfriend, my sweetie." His voice soothed her and she loved the attention, despite the incredible language gap between his English and her Serbo-Croatian. This was how he spent so many of his brief, but frequent, visits to the infirmary. The staff was too small and too busy to give her this level of attention.

He had his family send bed linen with Sesame Street characters for his young friend, and he passed some of his time pointing at Big Bird or Cookie Monster and telling her their English names. Other times he would just sit and talk to her, stroke her hair, touch her cheeks, and hold her hand.

We left the infirmary that day and I continued the rest of my familiarization visit to the Canadian Battle Group. A short visit to a hospital for mentally challenged isn't normally a significant event, and this isn't the first time that I saw Canadian soldiers assisting in this way. The Canadian Contingent in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria adopted an orphanage in Jerusalem in the 1970s, and the Canadians in Zagreb contributed enough deutschmarks to a local orphanage to give them a wonderful Christmas party in 1995, with enough left over for other needs.

There is a lot of discussion about military forces working to gain the hearts and minds of people in areas where they are deployed, but for these Canadians, there was no effort to win hearts and minds.

Theirs were quiet, personal contributions, not by the Canadian military contingents in support of civil-military affairs, but by individual Canadian soldiers in support of a deeper, more personal imperative.

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(Timothy Dunne is a retired Canadian military public affairs officer with peacekeeping experience in the Middle East, Bosnia Herzegovina, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Kosovo. He lives in Dartmouth, N.S.)