

Operating in Bosnia

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Introduction

It is very difficult to know what is actually happening in Bosnia. It is a war in Europe, it is very close to home and it suffers a news hype from the huge number of representatives from the media in Bosnia. The awful violence there has become normality and is largely ignored. It is only when a new and more awful twist of violence occurs that it becomes headline news again. Thus for the majority of the last two years a very vicious and nasty civil war has continued relatively unnoticed by the population of Europe.

What I will talk about here is my view of Bosnia, a view very much seen through the eyes of a soldier who was there from May to November last year in command of the British Battalion in Vitez. I am not going to cover much background nor politics - the background because it is well documented, and the politics because I think British soldiers learnt a long time ago that fingers get burnt when they dabble in politics.

I will concentrate on two areas, the first being the British battalion and its task - how we did that task, our deployment - and then after that I will pick up some themes from what for me was a most unusual six months, perhaps the most unusual six months of my entire time in the British Army.

There was a watershed in Bosnia last year when, in April 1993, some 92 Muslims were massacred at Armici by the Croats, an event which is now well documented and which marked the break-up of the fragile alliance between Croats and Muslims in central Bosnia. Until that time things had been relatively settled with Croats and Muslims fighting together against the common Serbian enemy. However, on the ground things were not quite so clearly defined. Of the three groups - Serb, Muslim or Croat - at any stage in time or in any area of Bosnia two of them could be allied against the third. In addition alliances could change overnight. There is no logic. Within an area of 20km, a whole group of people could suddenly change their allegiance and would be fighting

alongside another ethnic group. Even today up in the north end of Tuzla, at the tip of the finger, there are Croats quite happily fighting alongside Muslims, and Serbs fighting against the Serbs attacking the finger. However, from the massacre at Armici until well after my Battalion had left Bosnia, Croats and Muslims were very much at odds in Central Bosnia.

The Task and Mission

We had particular tasks and methods of operation in Bosnia. As part of the United Nations Protection Force in Bosnia (UNPROFOR) my task was to provide an escort to the convoys from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) through our area of operations at their request. In addition we were to provide assistance to endangered people as required. That was all. There was no further close direction either from the United Nations or from the British Government or military.

Strange as though it may seem, I was quite delighted with that because my hands were entirely free to deal with the problem as I saw fit. I then asked if I could go out on a reconnaissance as soon as possible. My request was soon granted and within a fortnight I flew to Bosnia, met Colonel Bob Stewart and saw what he and the Cheshire's had established and set up under the very difficult circumstances of a very harsh winter.

On reflection back in the Battalion's base in Germany I realised that Bosnia was a very unique area, and the task equally unique. There was no template to be drawn from my experiences in the Army and the easy solution of 'it has worked somewhere else so it will work here' was clearly a non-starter. It wasn't a task the British Army had done before. It was unusual to be in a war but not at war; we were effectively sitting right in the middle of somebody else's civil war. In the past, when the British army has been deployed on operations, in the Falklands for example, there has been a line drawn across the map: below the line

there are good people, and above is written 'here be dragons'. The line moves slowly forwards as the battle progresses. The same with the Gulf War. A line across the map in the sand, 'dragons' above and the coalition forces below and it was relatively clear cut. A straightforward war, if any war can be straightforward. Moreover, both in the Falklands and the Gulf, there were very few civilians involved. In Bosnia we were in a very vicious civil war where the army was the people and the people were the Army. Any male between sixteen and sixty was a soldier and that made life somewhat difficult.

It was clear that I needed a plan, a concept of operations that everybody could understand and hang their hat on. But one thing I was quite clear about was that in escorting convoys, there is no good in just putting an armoured vehicle at the front of a column and an armoured vehicle at the back and driving off up a road; it will get absolutely nowhere. A single all encompassing, clear, simple and workable strategy is needed. Therefore I defined the mission for the battalion as 'to create the conditions whereby aid could be delivered into and through our area of responsibility'.

That strategy and its specific mission was based on the possession of information. I believed that if we knew exactly what was happening in every last square inch of our area, then we would hold an element of power, we would be able to anticipate and then take positive steps to ensure that any UNHCR convoy would get through.

Intelligence

To this end I was very fortunate to have a bright young Captain as my intelligence officer. For the entire six months he ran my military information cell as the hub of the information gathering system that we established. We gleaned our information from various sources and levels in order to anticipate and see what was going on.

Local commanders

The first source was the local ethnic commanders: the Bosnian Croat Commander and his opposite number on the Bosnian Muslim side. One with the HVO, the Croat militia forces, and the other with the BiH, the Muslim forces. These commanders were in the main ex-Yugoslav army officers

brought up under the communist regime, very able people and I had what was by any standards an extraordinary relationship with them. It became very personal - I would threaten them, I would flatter them, I would embarrass them, I would annoy them, I would cajole them. I would trust them, they would trust me and then we would have huge arguments the next day.

On one occasion we received a phone call in the base at half past eight in the morning and I wasn't there. Enver Hadjihasanovic, the commander of 3rd Corps, would not leave a message. When I saw him the next day and asked him what the phone call was about, he just said 'I had promised to ring you before we attacked and I like to keep my promises'.

Some time later I appointed him a liaison officer, which he was terribly chuffed with because it gave him a lot of kudos to have a British army liaison officer attached to him. Although he was very pleased he also suddenly realised that my liaison officer was reporting back to me with everything that was going on, so he quickly appointed a liaison officer to my liaison officer. The two of them went around together, but as expected my officer then got very little information.

A kind of 'chess match' then developed and it was my move. The next day I told my officer to ignore his 'minder' and go out on his own to pick up his old contacts. About a week later Hadjihasanovic and I met again and he immediately said 'What the hell is going on, your liaison officer is all over the place. I thought we had an agreement'. I said, 'I'm terribly sorry, there must be some awful misunderstanding. Your move'. He laughed and understood entirely. That was the sort of relationship.

On some occasions it could become more than slightly tricky. On another day he said to me 'Do you see my opposite number?' I said 'Of course I do, I'm seeing him this afternoon'. He said, 'What time?' 'About four o'clock'. 'Where?' 'Hotel Vitez'. He then said, 'OK, make sure you are out by half past five'.

I wasn't out by half past five, I left at 25 minutes to six, at which stage he was shelling the hotel. I went to see him again the next day and asked him why he had been shelling the hotel. He said to me, 'I told you to be out by half past five, you weren't out, your problem'.

Despite this we were actually very good friends and, in another incident before the end of my time in Bosnia he said to me, 'When are you leaving with your troops?' I replied that I would be out on 15 November and added that it would be nice to have a peaceful time to move out because the move is quite complicated. Hadjihasanovic laughed and added in turn, 'We entirely understand, we will not attack or intimidate any British UN soldier until the 16th and then we'll give your successors the Coldstream Guards absolute hell'. I was quite happy with that.

From that particular relationship throughout the tour I was able to gather information about what was going on, what future plans were and, more importantly, the mood of the Croats and Muslims in my area.

The European Community Monitoring Mission

The second source was the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM), which was gathering information all the time. Its representatives visited us on a daily basis. They were unarmed, wore white suits and soon became known as the cricket team. They had a French Ambassador who was particularly effective. He was a very clever, able career diplomat, but he had a nasty habit of teeing up a meeting and leaving at the last minute for me to chair a crucial debate, but I got used to it.

The ECMM was a catalyst across all levels. It would negotiate between the men in the trenches on the front lines right the way up to the senior politicians on each side and, throughout my time in Bosnia, it was an invaluable source of good advice and useful information.

Liaison officers

I also had a team of liaison officers, all very young 24 year old Captains, who worked directly for me. Each was appointed to a specific area and they knew exactly what I wanted: quality information. I did not tell them how exactly to get the information; I just said go out and find out what is going on. As a result they maintained very personal relationships with the local ethnic forces commanders on the ground, to the extent that when they left Bosnia most of them were presented with shotguns, pistols, slivovitz, Bosnian flags, Croat

flags and other presents. I would often accompany them on their visits. I always tried to go as early in the morning as possible on the visits, for reasons which will become apparent.

One morning at half past eight I went to see a delightful man called Shefkir, the commander of a group of Muslims in an isolated enclave. The reason I went at half past eight was to avoid the inevitable pint of slivovitz, but since it was early I got vodka instead - you can't win everything. The drink was alright; it was coping with three lunches in one day that became very difficult and turning down the hospitality was sometimes out of the question.

The liaison officers went everywhere. I caught one of them with a set of photographs once. I said 'Where's that?' His reply - You don't need to know Sir'. I said 'OK, I don't need to know'. I knew where he had been - across the lines and amongst the Serbian soldiers. It didn't matter, the information was coming in. The liaison officers were all shot at, they all travelled in soft skinned landrovers and they were all quite outstanding. I am always amazed how well British army officers can do when they are allowed to work entirely on their own and with only the minimum of direction.

Patrols

Finally, my soldiers were deployed on the ground in Warrior tracked armoured vehicles and led by young 20 year old platoon commanders, to find out routes, poke their noses around, negotiate roadblocks, and escort vehicles. And with those tasks was a further requirement to gather information. All that information was then assembled, sorted and sifted and we were then able to anticipate what was going to happen.

Obviously the ideal of the system we developed was to allow convoys to pass with no physical escort at all. Once the right conditions have been created and we knew what was going on, the convoys could run straight through because we had a grip on the whole area. We did not always achieve that ideal, because each area in Central Bosnia was different and occasionally a convoy likes a bit of clout with it - a bit of physical presence from the armoured vehicles can be very important. We were there as and when required. Finally, it was always important to remember that as a witness, particularly with the Media present,

perhaps with the ECMM there as well, atrocities can be prevented. We did that on a number of occasions.

Nevertheless, throughout my time in Central Bosnia, every convoy I was presented with by the UNHCR that came in to my area got to its destination. There may have been a six hour delay, or in some cases a 24 hour delay, but 923 UNHCR convoys were all seen through to their destinations.

Deployment

That was how we operated and I think it was effective. I should now like to just touch on the details of our deployment to meet the task. Down on the Dalmatian coast in Split, there was a British Brigadier, COMBRITFOR, who, with his headquarters, was my 'top cover'.

I regard that as absolutely essential, because it is very difficult to command a battalion on the ground whilst looking over the shoulder wondering what is going on behind. A one star commander, in this case with his headquarters, kept people off my back.

Brigadier Robin Searby did so for the whole of my time in Bosnia very, very effectively. Thankfully, he also didn't interfere with me at the front, which was tremendous. He provided me with my equipment, support and everything I needed and he fended off questions from Joint Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence - a superb buffer. I have personal experience of some other commanding officers within the UN system who had to carry around portable satellite telephones and their MoD's would ring them up in the middle of nowhere.

That is no way to command a battalion. I was delighted with the national command system and I think it is essential for such operations that this sort of 'top cover' is required for the people on the ground. In short, let the troops on the ground get on with the job and have someone else keep the world and his wife off their back.

For the entire time I was in Bosnia we really only had one effective aid route. It ran from Split up through Tomislavgrad, Gornji Vakuf, on into the Croat pocket, and out into Zenica, which was the

main UNHCR warehouse, and then on to a further UNHCR warehouse up in Tuzla.

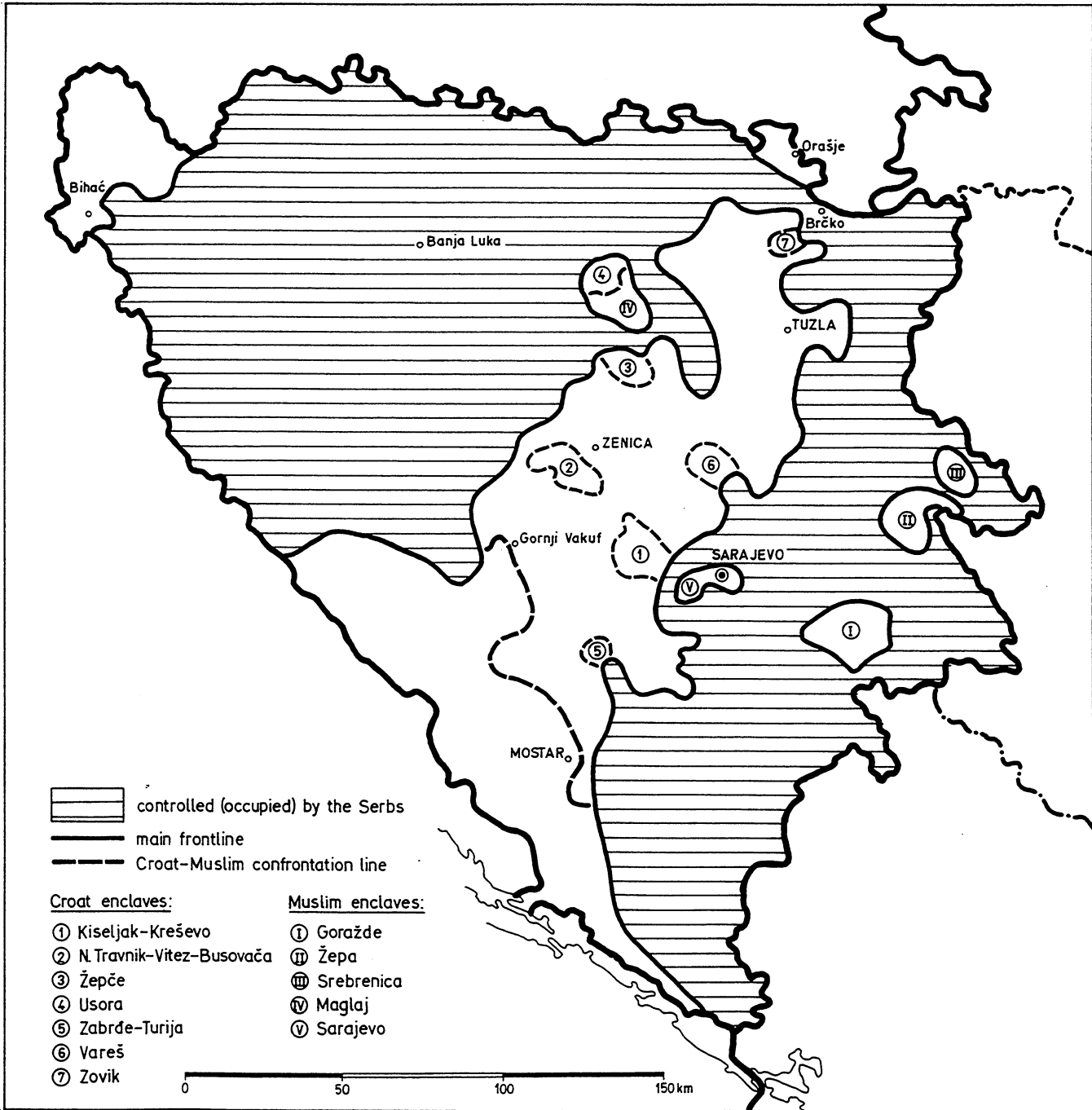
There were many problems on the route. Crossing the Croatian border is the first hurdle. Then shortly afterwards there was a crossing of the front line between Croat forces in the south and Muslim forces in the north. Then crossing the lines twice more in order to get to Zenica. So every convoy had three or four line crossings, and that led to huge command and control problems. We also had convoys coming in from Travnik, crossing the lines with the Serbs. Oddly enough, I only met Serb officers twice during my tour and they were not a problem for us. I know in other parts of Bosnia the Serbs are the main problem. I have certainly seen that in recent days. Throughout the six months I was there convoys came across at Travnik quite happily and also at Zvornic in the North and on up to Tuzla. All were quite happily unseen, unsung, happening every other day and very effective.

Main effort

It is also important to appreciate the sheer size of the country. From Split by road to Vitez it was six hours on a good day, sometimes in a truck it would take about 12. From Vitez, on up to Tuzla is another six hours. So there are huge distances involved. As commanding officer, with a TAOR (Territorial Area of Responsibility) some 180km by 40, I felt somewhat stretched to say the least. And what is more, the British Battalion was directly responsible for some 85% of the whole primary aid route. So I had to decide where my main effort was to be. We could not spread all the way across every town, road and valley, otherwise the soldiers would have been just frittered away.

The main effort for me was in the Lasva Valley, which ran down from Travnik to the Vitez area and across the front lines and down to Gornji Vakuf, which was about an hour away. That relatively small area became my main effort, where I put all my armour. The rest of my area was sliced off to control by United Nations Monitoring Officers, to the UK Liaison Officers and to my own liaison officers. I was very selective. If some areas of my TAOR were quiet and the aid routes were not jeopardised, then I was happy to leave those areas to others to keep under control.

Frontlines and Enclaves in Bosnia-Herzegovina, November 1993



Source: Klemencic, M (1994) 'Territorial proposals for the settlement of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Boundary and Territory Briefing*, 1, 3, Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit

The companies of the Battalion were well spread out. First there was a company in Gornji Vakuf right on the front line, in between the two fighting factions. Our main base was in Vitez, with two more companies and, again, was right on the front line between the two factions. Finally Tuzla, an airfield up in the North which was occasionally shelled by the Serbs. On a number of occasions I was asked why I had my bases right on the front lines. It would certainly have been tricky to move them and if one was living on a front line one could never be accused of being anything else except impartial. That said, living in no-mans land for six months does create problems of its own.

Although that route was long and very tenuous, running from the south all the way up across hundreds of miles of the former republic of Yugoslavia, there was always a critical 20km, and if that 20km was open, then all the aid would get through. For example, the area by Gornji Vakuf became the critical 20km when the fighting flared up there for a period of some three months. The area around Vitez, a little island of Croats in a sea of Muslim-held territory, became a major problem, until we had resolved it and established a new system of convoy control. Equally, the area around Kisslejak, in another small Croat pocket, was a problem when ethnic violence between Croat and Muslim began to flare. There always seemed to be one area that caused us a problem and we would invariably have a point of main effort on which to concentrate our work.

Aid distribution

On the day-to-day tasking of the Battalion, the convoys were obviously my prime concern. We were only responsible for primary distribution, that is to those main warehouses in Zenica and Tuzla, although we did get enormously involved in the secondary distribution. The warring factions in Bosnia deliberately began to manipulate aid, denying it to the other ethnic group wherever possible. The Muslims would say, 'We're not going to let that convoy through because it is going to Croats'. The Croats would plead the reverse. I would deliberately accuse each side of committing a war crime by denying humanitarian aid and it was often effective to start writing names in books - it could make the Croat and Muslim soldiers a little bit twitchy. But the manipulation of the aid was a major problem which could quickly escalate to a hideously and ridiculously convoluted log jam. Unless one packet of Farleys rusks was delivered

to a child in Vitez we were not able to deliver thousands of tonnes of aid to the citizens of Tuzla. Unjamming the logs was a daily task for myself, the teams of liaison officers and the ECMM.

Humanitarian tasks

Operation SLAVEN as it was called, which brought in refugees across the front line between Muslims and Serbs at Travnik, often appeared in the press. These displaced people were in the main Muslims who had been expelled from Bosnian Serb held areas and thousands came across during the six months we were in Bosnia. It is particularly sad to see people shipped as displaced persons, with no rights at all, with their possessions in a plastic bag and that's it. They come in as a displaced person, had to be supported by the local population and fed by the UNHCR.

In addition we evacuated some 300 plus severely injured casualties out of the temporary hospital inside the Croatian pocket near Vitez. It took a lot of effort and a lot of work but we eventually got them out and that was very good news. Every day there was an incident of one form or other to be dealt with.

For example two bus loads of guest workers from Germany decided they wished to go home to Tuzla. Despite being warned that they were running straight into a war, they chose to ignore that advice. Unfortunately they simply could not believe our descriptions of what their fellow countrymen were doing to each other. They went into the war zone and sadly they were mortared, three were killed, eight were injured and I refused to allow them into my camp. At the time I was given a deal of criticism from the media, but I knew that in certain areas the French had sheltered displaced people in their camps, and in one case they ended up with what was effectively a concentration camp with 800 people in it who could not be moved on. In Bosnia short term solutions invariably caused long term problems.

We became involved in a lot of body exchanges, which is not a very pleasant thing to do, particularly when those bodies have been dug up for the fourth time. People tended to be buried somewhat thoughtlessly wrapped in plastic sheeting, and digging up bodies and exchanging them was not much fun. We were involved in this

gruesome task because we knew it was very important to the local people.

We also rescued many people out of what I can only call 'life threatening situations', again a direct task for the Battalion, helping where we could under Article 3 of the Geneva Convention 1949. Most notable was at Guci Gora church where 187 terrified Croat women and children had been cut off by the fighting and were surrounded by the Muslims. After six hours of negotiations to get my armoured vehicles in, we eventually lifted them out and got them to safety. I have no doubt that they would have been killed or certainly given a very nasty time if they had stayed, and that small operation was a very successful day.

Finally, it wasn't publicised very much, and I didn't want it to be at the time because it might have caused problems, but some 4,000 children in the area attended tea parties run by my Battalion. It sounds a small thing, but it was actually very important. We would go into a village, set up the stalls, feed them tea and buns, talk to them, they could look at our Warriors and equipment and we got to know them. It was a bit of normality, almost like a sort of open day for the Army in these war torn villages. I think my soldiers probably enjoyed those few hours of normality with some delightful kids more than anything.

Working within the Mandate

I should like to turn to some comments on the Mandate, the Rules of Engagement and the use of force. I was well aware that the war in Bosnia was not my war. It was someone else's war and I was there to prevent strife if I could, but only where possible. In reality, the end of negotiations between Croat and Muslim began as we arrived in Bosnia and the massacre of Armici had just taken place. As a result, the two sides, Croat and Muslim, had stopped talking. I should perhaps explain that when there is a small village that is surrounded by one or other of the warring factions and is about to be attacked, the danger can be headed off and casualties prevented. But when there is an attack by one of the sides which involves a full Corps advance, then it is slightly difficult and verging on the very foolish to get in the way. So, to be honest, at that stage we stood back. The normal message on the radio I would hear would be, 'Eh up Sir, there's hell on down here' by which I knew from one of my Yorkshire

soldiers that there was something slightly bigger than a small localised fight going on.

Sufficient troops

I was quite clear that for the task we had to do at that time, the mandate and rules of engagement were sufficient for me to carry out my tasks. In those last months of the summer of 1993 I really believed that, with the current tasks, the current mandate and the same area, if I had been given any more troops it would not have made a significant difference, provided the task remained the same. We were there to do the task of ensuring the aid got through, we had a certain number of troops in that area, we were fulfilling our mission and every convoy was getting through. I know there were a lot of cries for more troops. But I do stress that my comments are only relevant to the situation as I found it last year when I was in Bosnia, and I am well aware that the situation now may be completely different.

The use of force

You also have to be particularly careful in United Nations Operations on how and when force is to be applied to meet a situation. Military force is a very blunt instrument. Before it is used, those who use it have to be very clear as to exactly what is to be achieved and have a completely clear aim. I often felt that on certain UN Operations not everyone involved was entirely clear as to what the endgame was to be. Once used, force cannot be taken back and there are always ramifications. If those ramifications have not been thought through carefully and in depth, then there could well be big trouble.

In general I found that a short term solution gave me a long-term problem. For example, if I smashed through a road barrier with a Warrior (easy to do), I would not get through the next day. But negotiation through that same barrier could get us through for the next three weeks. Time is traded for action. The Displaced Persons (DPs) outside my camp I turned away; we were not a refugee camp. We were a United Nations base, supporting half a million DPs. The short term solution was to bring them in; the long term problem was how to get rid of all those people later on when, *de facto*, responsibility for their safety had switched to the UN.

We opened fire on 69 separate occasions in Bosnia against all factions involved in the conflict out there. There was no backlash whatsoever from the local commanders. Indeed, they had told me that on a number of occasions they were quite happy if I shot who I liked, they didn't mind at all. Very sadly, the rule of the gun is what matters in Bosnia, the man with the AK-47 is a big man. I had clout because with 56 Warriors I was considered to be the most powerful man in Central Bosnia.

As an aside, I also think that the British people did not mind me shooting a few of the Bosnian locals. The British public was actually quite happy on the basis that if somebody in a far off country, as they consider it, is shooting at a British soldier, that soldier is entitled to fire back, and that's what we did. Unfortunately, that involved killing some 30 plus people, of which I'm not proud, but it was necessary to show robustness and a positive attitude, because if not, all credibility can be lost. We only used the chain gun and small arms. I did not resort to the main armament on the Warrior, but we had to be careful because it is easy to go over the top in this business of being robust.

For example, in Gornji Vakuf, every time we were fired at we fired back and things began to escalate violently. Shootings by either side, UN and locals, were happening more and more often until at one stage the Croats fired back with a wire-guided anti-tank missile. This was clearly upping the ante a touch and besides which, what were we going to do in response? Well, the response was that we went back to first principles and asked the question 'Are we achieving our aim? Are we creating the conditions to get the aid through?' Well we weren't. So we talked to the local commanders, and we managed to de-escalate the situation, and get the convoys moving again. I was fortunate to have had an exceptionally good company commander who did a lot of the negotiations personally and then ended up parking his Warrior in the main street of Gornji Vakuf between the two factions and smoking a couple of packets of Hamlets, but he got away with it, and the convoys rolled again.

Active impartiality

You have to be careful. Then there is the issue of revenge - my interpreter was killed after six weeks out in Bosnia. Some of my soldiers were

convinced that something must be done. But revenge is not the course of action of a civilised man; we must keep careful control of the way people behave and we must be seen to be impartial, actively impartial. It is difficult for the soldiers to appreciate. My Warrior gunner announced to me, 'Sir, I've been to the bloody Gulf, I've been to bloody Northern Ireland and now I've come to Bosnia as a peacemaker and I've shot some bastard, what's going on?'

It was a difficult place to be and it was difficult to explain such apparent anomalies. We were not neutral, we were even handed. To say that we were neutral is, I believe, a passive form of inaction. You have got to be active and you have got to be even-handed, actively even-handed and positive all the time. I was well aware that I was walking on a tightrope, and that it was a pretty difficult and long tightrope, people were pushing it with sticks trying to push me off, and to make matters worse, somebody was also shaking the wire.

Everything I did was wrong as far as somebody was concerned. One of those factions out there, be it UNHCR, the International Red Cross, or the Bosnians and the Croats, something would be wrong with whatever I did and I learned to accept it as one of the problems of being in Bosnia. A Bosnian cease fire is not a cease fire - it is a cessation of hostile activity. In a militia army, when a militia man changes over sentry and there is a large machine gun and he says to the chap coming off, 'Slobodan, is that working? Slobodan says yes, and he says 'Well prove it', the gun has to be fired. So how can a cease fire be kept? In short, with great difficulty. So a cessation of hostile activity is a better way of putting it.

Rumours

Rumours abound. There was a rumour that I was offered two million deutschmarks (DM) to bring weapons in for the Muslims. This rumour was completely true, but after their offer I actually asked for 15 million DM. The Muslims then adjourned to an outer office, discussed my suggestion and then told me it was too much. If I had taken 15 million DM I probably wouldn't be here now. My soldiers were also apparently offered 1,000 DM for manning a Croat trench for the night. I was rumoured to be getting 2,000 DM to run Croats out of a pocket down in the south.

That is the communist mentality - everyone has their price. I was also sent a bill for 750 DM for my Warriors damaging paving stones in Vitez. It was somewhat ironic that at this point some areas of Vitez had been turned into rubble by the fighting.

The UN

The United Nations is an interesting organisation to work for. General Morillon, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, had a wonderful habit when he talked of going from French to English and back to French again. Most of the British officers could handle it, but many officers in his own headquarters were lost and it was fascinating to talk to them afterwards. There were also misunderstandings - when everyone is talking English: halfway through a phone call, you can be asked whether you are 'through yet'. You say in your best British voice, 'Yes, thank you very much', but they being American English speakers cut you off immediately so it can be a huge problem. On the occasion when it has taken 10 minutes on a satellite phone trying to get through it can be very annoying.

There is also a problem interpreting UN directives down at soldier level. This convoy you will escort, because it is a UNHCR convoy. This convoy is a Muslim convoy, you will monitor it. Fine, I and my officers can understand that, but what does it actually mean? Are we escorting this convoy or not? What am I supposed to do? That is where things become difficult. The interpretation of highfalutin political decisions down to practical measures on the ground is where your officers start to earn their pay in a big way.

Having said all that, the UN organisation deployed in Bosnia does work. There are hiccoughs, there are problems, but it has worked and an awful lot of aid has been got through and, in consequence, a great many lives have been saved.

The Media

I think no discussion on Bosnia would be complete without mention of the media and what they did. I have to say that it is extremely difficult now to compete with electronic news gathering, particularly when there was one press man for every twelve soldiers in the camp. The presence

of ZDF, RTL, CNN, ABC, SIGMA, FOX, World News, Sky and finally ITV and BBC at the back end, does create a bit of pressure on the Commanding Officer.

I was aware that I was very much on my own, and I was aware of the intense media scrutiny of each and every one of my actions. I gave the press a lot of background briefs in my house, off-the-record, so they understood what was going on. I think that was an enormous advantage. I also think it was an advantage that I was working with the United Nations and not for a solely British operation because, deployed with the UN, I did not have to worry about British national policy. The press statements were planned and released, and immediately it was essential to think of the inevitable four nasty questions which would be asked, and all the while keeping fingers crossed that we were taking the right line, as I was very much aware that we were on our own. Fortunately, in the whole of the six months in Bosnia I had no really serious problems with the Media.

Normality in Bosnia

I would like to finish with some comments on a number of areas. The first one is the effect of living on a front line. Both Vitez and Gornji Vakuf were effectively in no-man's-land for between four and six months, so it does become a little bit of a problem. Every one was shot at, shelled or mined at some stage. Normally in the Army everything is reported very calmly. But in Bosnia there was so much fighting we had to be a bit selective. There was a simple way of doing this: we had two definitions of being shot at.

The first one was in a situation where a bullet would whistle overhead quite happily and everyone would turn round and look at the person who fired them and go 'bugger you': that was recorded as a 'bugger you'. On the other hand, when the bullets came particularly close and everyone was trying to get further inside their helmet or flak jacket, that was known as a 'bugger me'.

Fortunately there were a lot less bugger me's than bugger you's, so we were allright. But the soldiers' perception of normality was changed. Standing in the Officers' Mess there would be a party of visitors who had just arrived. At the same

time bullets were striking the sides of the Officers' Mess, which was quite normal for us, and a visitor would hear one of my officers say 'Sorry was your drink a Guinness or a lager?' and this just as another bullet whistled overhead. Or people sitting upstairs watching the television as dust fell down from the roof above, and all those watching the television were doing was sitting there holding a hand across the top of their beer so it didn't get dust in it. Our perception of normality had moved but when we got back I think we all became normal again.

Living on a front line

The British soldier is actually quite a robust individual. Despite this strain through all those months we did have some assistance in the form of a psychiatric nurse. A hundred soldiers went to see that nurse because they were worried. They were worried on three counts. Firstly, was a mortar bomb going to come through the roof and kill them? Secondly, was their wife, and/or girlfriend going to accept them when they got back? Thirdly, the image of a nasty incident would not go away.

When we got back to Germany two of those threats were removed and they were just left with the nasty incident. Of those 100 who saw the nurse, 25 went back for a second visit, and only three for a third. I would like to think this was because my officers knew that they should notice these things as a part of their command function. It is a commander's responsibility to notice what's wrong with his soldiers. It is also a command function to talk to them about what they have seen and done. Once British soldiers realise that it is quite normal to feel bloody awful about something they have seen which is quite horrific then all is well.

We changed our attitude towards going to see the psychiatric nurse, and I think that 18 months before I had gone out to Bosnia if one of my soldiers was referred to a psychiatrist I would have had doubts about his ability to continue as a soldier. But in Bosnia a soldier would come in to a room and somebody would say 'where have you been?' 'I've been to see the psychiatric nurse mate, because I've seen some action and you haven't'. I thought that it was a very healthy attitude. People get over these problems, but I think it is very important not to overplay the psychiatric bit. Tommy Atkins as a soldier is pretty robust. All I

would stress is that he should not be asked to go back to a 'Bosnia' type of situation too quickly after his return.

The Warrior Armoured Personnel Carrier

I was delighted with the performance of my Warrior armoured personnel carriers. I took a full strength Warrior battalion, with all the bits and pieces and we had artillery on hand, mortars, the lot. Fortunately we did not require to use all that firepower. But we did train for high intensity conflict; we trained for an all arms battle. I believe that if you can train for high intensity operations and get it right, then you can step down to anything else. I'm quite clear that the Warrior was the right vehicle to send - not only is it a very good protection, it has very good armament, good communications and it gives you a psychological 'clout' which has been proven time and time again.

We had eleven vehicles that went over mines, including my own vehicle, and from those incidents only one casualty, so it is a very good vehicle. The Warriors were also hugely reliable. We were averaging 14,000km per vehicle per month. Availability of vehicles was in the 98 - 99% at all times, every single day. That was a big effort, and again that was what the British Headquarters in Split were doing every day, pushing those vital spares and logistic support forward to us.

British Officers and Soldiers

I was also fortunate with the quality of my soldiers, that and the very young British officers, who are also very good news. One of my lieutenants was driving his Warrior along just near Prozor, which is south of Gornji Vakuf and General Praliac, then a Croat General, came round the corner and ran his Colt Shogun straight into the front of the Warrior. The Shogun's front end was severely damaged. Praliac leapt out brandishing his pistol and shouting and screaming at everybody. The subaltern took his helmet off, climbed out, fetched his interpreter and said, 'General I don't know what you're doing, but officers should not behave like that. Put that pistol away, calm down and behave like a gentleman'. The general put his pistol away and calmed down.

The soldiers were also always very persistent, very stubborn, and simply got on with things. The drills we used to get through road blocks for example, when one man sitting on a plastic chair with a mine and an AK47 can stop a convoy if he wished. The boys got used to chatting them up. If you brandish a couple of cigarettes and a large cup of steaming hot coffee, it's a bit of an invitation and you chat up the local militia. If that didn't work the second method was to threaten to summon Dan Damon and the Sky news team and expose them to the world as a potential war criminal who were delaying humanitarian aid.

The other method which was particularly useful was if a Warrior could be got around and behind the road block. It is a bit embarrassing for the militia soldier. He's got a Warrior behind and he does feel a little foolish in the middle. Finally, and if all else failed, I would offer the guy a drink because most of them were drunk on the road blocks and at that stage drink can only help. The British soldier knows how to get round these things and they do a tremendous job.

We took it one day at a time out there. On a good day I would ask my operations officer, 'Have we had anyone injured?' The answer 'No'. 'Has all the aid got through?' the answer 'Yes'. That was a good day and we took it at that - it kept it simple and in proportion.

Getting the job done

Was it worthwhile? Well, I think it was very much worthwhile. We saved lives directly and indirectly. We saved lives directly in those actions where we actually went in and pulled people out and got them to safety. Indirectly, we were saving lives by those 35,000 tonnes of aid that we escorted in, and just our physical presence there often calmed things down. We fed, or assisted in the feeding of half a million displaced people in our area and we calmed the tensions down. People thought a bit more before they did things. Just before I left, I met General Praliac. We had a discussion about things and he was quite cheerful. He said to me 'The British are very, very professional - they are very, very cold', and then he added ' You are also very arrogant'.

I can live with that description. We were professional in Bosnia. I think that by 'cold' he meant that we were impartial, we didn't get too

enthused about things with them, we were pretty straight and perhaps we were a bit arrogant, but as I say, I can live with it. I think my battalion got the job done.

Colonel Alastair Duncan (DSO, MBE) commanded a British UN battalion in Bosnia for six months in 1993. This paper is based on a presentation given to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and subsequently published in the *RUSI Journal*. Reproduced with kind permission.