

Convoy to Sarajevo

Tuesday, 22 August 2006

This is an account of a few days during the war in Bosnia, (there are no lurid descriptions of the atrocities that were so common) just a personal account of a couple of days experienced by myself and a few other Aid Workers during April 1994. When the United Nations could not find a way to get into Sarajevo, we did.

This is dedicated to the memory of Ibrahim Shaheed Golightly, a stubborn Muslim Trucker, who found the Gate to Paradise, Insha Allah, on Mount Igman, running the blockade of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War in 1995.

I thank Allah for giving me the opportunity and the means to write this and may He make these memoirs of mine an inspiration both to myself, and to all those Brothers and Sisters of mine in Islam, to go forward to the strife, and dedicate ourselves to Jihad, in whatever form Almighty Allah gives it to us.
Amin.

This is probably of no interest to any one who was not there at the time, but it's a small piece of the history of the 20th Century, and it's publication along with others that describe the horrors of war during this period of time, may help to provoke thoughts in others at a future date.

Aid Convoy to Sarajevo

It was a warm spring afternoon in April, and I was sitting on a beach on the Dalmatian Riviera. I was working for a Humanitarian Aid organization called 'Convoy of Mercy', as their fleet manager. We had four ex-Army Bedford MK trucks, which we had been using for the past three months to ferry food and medical supplies into Central Bosnia. Our work had taken us into places that were being highlighted by the world's press as centres of death and destruction, the likes of which had not been seen in Europe since the 1940's. It also brought us into contact with some of the large organizations that were financed by governments, and various religious groups. One of these was Caritas, the aid arm of the Roman Catholic Church, and they now featured in the conversation that I was engaged in. Ibrahim Golightly, my boss, and the Senior Field Officer, or 'Convoy Leader' of our outfit, had come over and was sitting next to me, as I was soaking up the spring sunshine.

"How are we fixed to take forty tons into Sarajevo?" He asked.

Funny how you can go from the sublime to the ridiculous in one easy sentence, isn't it? It's not every day that you have to expedite such a request. Sarajevo was under siege by the Bosnian Serb Army, and had been for over two years! The only way in or out was by air, on the flights that supplied the UN forces, or on the UNHCR convoy's that the Serbs let through or not, according to their whim. As you may imagine, the situation inside Sarajevo was desperate, and although people were not starving to death, malnutrition was a way of life for civilian and soldier alike.

As we had no affiliation with the UN we were not bound by their regulations, nor were we entitled to any help from them. This left us free to operate where ever we wished, but we had to look after ourselves. Sometimes we were assisted by the various army units, especially the Malaysians, (Malbat) who were stationed in Jablanica and Konjic, and by the British Army, (Britbat) in Vitez. So it was that we had gained something of a reputation amongst the other, larger UN affiliated organizations, for whom we often used to carry aid, of being able to go where others could not. Hence the request by Caritas to attempt to access Sarajevo.

Ibrahim's query, about forty tons was a tall order. We only had four trucks at that time, and with a maximum payload of five tons per truck, twenty tons was our limit. Another small outfit, The Bosnian Aid Committee of Oxford, with whom we often worked, had four trucks, so we would approach them with the intention of pressing them into service to provide the rest of the convoy. Understandably, they wanted details of what our proposed plan of action was, and so Ibrahim and I hosted a dinner party of pasta and tinned tuna fish. Over instant coffee, we filled them in on what we had in mind!

When Ibrahim had first mentioned to me that he wanted to go into Sarajevo he had shown me some dotted lines on a map, that were, according to the legend 'Horse Tracks'. Several of them joined together to make a network of paths that led over a mountain from Tarcin, to Hrasnica (a suburb of Sarajevo) a distance of some twenty kilometres or so. That mountain is Mount Igman. By road it was impossible to get into Sarajevo, without crossing Serb lines. Even if permission was granted to cross their lines, the Serbs invariably took half of the load of the convoy, to 'ensure equal distribution of Humanitarian Aid to both Serb, and Muslim civilians'. In reality, it was a just a way of reducing the amount of food reaching the surrounded civilian population of the enclaves. It had the added bonus, of course, of feeding their troops, and the civilian Bosnian Serb families that lived in their territories. These territories were connected to the outside world via the 'Brcko Corridor', to Belgrade, and Serbia proper. Logistics were not a problem for the Bosnian Serbs in those days and their army and their people were well fed and supplied, unlike the poor unfortunates in the besieged towns and cities. The necessity of reaching Sarajevo without losing half of our cargo (at each Serb Check point) did not have to be

explained to the drivers and crews that were present at our social evening. We all knew the realities of this war. We chewed over the problems, and discussed the probabilities, and then concluded that if any one could do it, we could. We had our Bedford trucks, and experienced drivers. We had Ibrahim to lead us, (his abilities in speaking the local language, and bluffing his way through checkpoints, were becoming legendary), and we had the element of surprise. What we had not reckoned on was the weather, and the bloody mindedness of Mount Igman!

We had studied the maps and the situation reports from the UN briefings we went to in Split. Indeed, there appeared to be no way in. Until we cross referenced those dotted lines Ibrahim had found on a commercial road map with the UN maps it looked impossible. It was at this point we discovered that the Serb lines would be very close to our route in some places. What we did not realize at the time was that in some places we would be only twenty metres from their trenches. We did realize, however, that at several points along the route, we would be within easy reach of Serb weaponry. The general consensus of opinion was that we had all come to The Balkans to work, realizing such situations would arise, and that we were all willing to go on such a trip.

So it was that on the morning of the 4th of April, 1994, the combined resources of Convoy of Mercy, and the Bosnian Aid Committee of Oxford, began loading forty tons of food parcels from Sweden, at the Caritas warehouse in Split. From here we drove to the dock area of Split; where we completed Customs formalities. Our brief from Caritas was to make it to Sarajevo if we could, or if not, we were to divert to what ever Aid distribution centres we thought fit, and deliver the food to them instead. At the time, none of us really thought we would fail to get to Sarajevo, but there was a fair amount of talk about the possibility of not being able to get out again. You can surprise someone with an unexpected move once, but trying to do the same thing again; two days later, won't work! We could well be joining the good citizens of Sarajevo in their incarceration!

The next day, we set off: Along the Dalmatian Highway, past Omis and Ploce to Metkovic where we crossed the old Croatian/Bosnian border, then on to Doljani. (There's a map at the back to refer to) Here we sat around for an hour or two, whilst Ibrahim negotiated the border crossing with the guards. They were always reluctant to let us cross. They regarded the recipients of the Aid we were carrying as their natural enemies, and they begrudged them every ounce of it. However, the United Nations would have to be answered to if we were denied access, and an explanation would have to be given to Caritas. You must remember that Croatia is a staunchly Roman Catholic country, and the Church is a very powerful force there. We were carrying aid for Caritas, and so we were their agent. Turning us back at the border would have been a career move (downwards!) for the brave official who would take responsibility. We travelled onwards; out of Croatian occupied Bosnia, or 'Hertsog Bosna' as Croatia likes to call it, and into Bosnia. Through ancient Mostar, and on to the little front line town of Jablanica. By now it was late afternoon, and we wanted to make it to the Malaysian Battalion H.Q. in the town of Konjic before dark. No one travelled at night in Bosnia if they could possibly avoid it. To do so attracted the attention of the bandit gangs that haunted the deserted areas adjacent to the confrontation lines. Even a large convoy like ours, unless it was armed, could easily fall prey to these modern day Highwaymen with their AK-47's. After a brief stop for a coffee break, we pushed on to Konjic through the failing daylight and it was with a sense of relief that we turned into the sandbagged and razor wire gateway that was the entrance to the Malbat HQ in Konjic. Once inside we were relatively safe. Only the occasional 105mm. shell threatened the security of this oasis of sanity and military order. The Malaysians welcomed us, and after showing us to the truck park, they allocated us two of the large tents that made up the village they had set up inside a huge warehouse. They then showed us the showers and the Musjid (Mosque) tent, and then where the canteen was. Much to everyone's delight, Chicken Curry and Rice was the star turn on the menu. `The best Chicken Curry in Bosnia' was Guy Hovey's verdict. He was right. It was probably the only Chicken Curry in Bosnia! We were clean, fed and had a bed for the night. Morale was restored after a long and tiring day. We turned in for the night, and as I lay in my sleeping bag, my thoughts went ahead to the problems that could face us the next day. Little did I, or any of us realise what we were in for!

The next morning, after a six o' clock breakfast, we checked over our trucks, and topped up the engine oil. By seven, we were winding our way up into the mountainous country side that is the beautiful heart of Bosnia, and on our way to Tarcin, and Mount Igman. It was a warm and sunny ten a.m. as we passed slowly through the little village of Lokve. The small Mosque, battered by artillery fire, stood beside the road; and many of the little houses clustered around it bore witness to the shot and shell of this unholy war. Small children clung to their mother's ankle long dresses, and the few remaining young men and elders of this tiny hamlet, eyed us suspiciously. Well they might. The only trucks that ever came this way were the engines of war, bent on death and destruction: and not a welcome visitor! Then they read the writing on the doors of our cabs. `Humanitarna Pomoc' Humanitarian Aid. The looks on their faces softened a little and their thoughts turned to matters other than war.

We never saw them do it. We never even noticed any activity behind us. Two young men climbed onto the back of the last truck in the convoy (mine!) and undid the sheets to get inside. They must have thrown out about a dozen food parcels before we cleared the village. Having done their bit for the local economy, they settled down in the back of the truck, to enjoy their ride to wherever it was they (mistakenly) thought we were going! I wonder, if they had known our ultimate destination, would have been so keen to join us?

Ignorance is bliss, as they say, and we blissfully wound our way up the ever narrowing road, climbing the lower slopes of a mountain whose name will remain engraved on my heart forever! In our cabs, we watched the dusty landscape turn to

greenery, and the clear sky become overcast, and leaden. Our ten ton, four wheel drive trucks made easy work of the rough mountain track. They churned happily through the mud holes, and bounced playfully over the rocks and ruts of the potholed track. In the back of my truck, the two stowaways munched happily on chocolate bars from Sweden. It started to snow. Gently at first, but then with a determination that was worrying. In our innocence (inexperience?) we had not come prepared for these conditions. As the convoy `wagon master', I was responsible for making sure that the vehicles and their crews were in a fit condition to make whatever journey they were called on to undertake. Having consulted the UN and my immediate superior, neither of whom had considered us at risk from snow and ice, I had not prepared for the conditions we now faced.

Convoy to Sarajevo

The story continues! The weather has changed for the worse, and the convoy is heading up onto Mount Igman. Stowaways on board, and the Serb guns looming.... join us on the mountain!

Our first encounter with Mount Igman was a gentle warning from the monster on whose rocky slopes we had dared to drive. On a left hand bend that had a thin covering of ice, (the temperature was down to -5c) the truck in front of me slid gracefully off the road and settled down comfortably with one wheel hanging over the edge of a small slope. Not a long drop, just a few feet in fact, but enough to keep us busy for the next three quarters of an hour with shovels and tow ropes. We fitted the five sets of snow chains that we did have, and carried on. We had to. There wasn't enough room on the narrow mountain track to turn the trucks around. On one side, a steep cliff face, and on the other, a drop of hundreds of feet. In the back of my truck, my two hitch hikers remained undetected. Carefully we inched our way along the icy road; slipping and sliding and not daring to think about the consequences of going off the track completely. In places the drop off the mountain was hundreds of feet, with nothing to stop a tumbling truck. Whilst negotiating my truck through a very narrow section of the track, I had a choice of either going right to the edge, or scraping a rock outcrop with the canvas sides of the Bedford. Having had seven other trucks, at ten tons a piece, run along it, the track edge looked a decidedly unattractive proposition. I weighed up the pro's and con's, and decided to try and steer a middle course through the problem. Unfortunately the mountain had other ideas. Just as I was passing the outcrop, the rear wheels of the truck slid off an ice covered rock, bringing 'Victoria' and the rock face together, ripping her canvas sides and spilling several boxes of Swedish generosity onto the ground. Cursing both my own lack of observation, and the situation in general, I dismounted to survey the damage at the back of the vehicle. John Cox, whom I was following, had witnessed the incident in his mirrors, and came to see if he could assist in any way. Then we noticed that the rear fastenings were undone. Yes, I had checked them that morning, and Yes, they were OK then. I climbed up into the back of the truck. Cans of food lay scattered about me and the wrappers of chocolate bars littered the place. Opened boxes were everywhere. Crouching behind a screen of these empty boxes were my two passengers. Angrily I demanded that they get out. One of them advanced on his hands and knees (there's not much room in a loaded truck) with a knife in his hand. Not a knife for slicing Swedish canned cheese you must understand, more the sort of knife for slicing English driver!

I backed off and climbed out of the truck. Assuring him we meant them no harm (if I'd had a pistol, I'd have quite happily shot him) we let him and his colleague dismount from the truck. Just a frightened youth trying to escape the consequences of his dishonest actions. I don't blame him. If the local military, had discovered the two youths, they would have shot them as looters. Starving communities can be quite touchy about people stealing their food! I forced a smile and told him to put away his knife, and to my relief he did just that. I relieved his friend of a bag of sugar, (35DMs on the black market) and a bottle of cooking oil (30 DMs) and sent them on their way. I went back to the cab to get a (smaller!) knife to cut away the remnants of the rear sheet. On returning to the rear of the truck, I found our local knifeman busy filling his pockets once again. The knife was still tucked into the waistband of his trousers, so the sound of my fist against the side of his head was as satisfying a sound as I could have wished to hear! Spilling his loot on the ground, he scampered up the road, leaving John and I to clear up the mess, and salvage the scattered tins and packets.

Twenty minutes later the snow had stopped falling, leaving the road, such as it was, covered with a treacherous combination of ice and wet snow. It was just at this moment that another of our trucks slithered to the edge of the precipice, and a rear wheel sank into the soft shoulder of the cliff edge. Poised between the hellish highway and the beckoning valley, 'Sarah Jane' had an air of desperation about her as we fitted a tow rope between her and the truck in front. After a prayer, I climbed into the cab to coax her back onto the road, and with a little help from the other truck, she responded to my pleading! Within five minutes and two hundred metres, she was back on the cliff edge. Again we had to battle against the combined forces of gravity and Mount Igman's determination to bring about our downfall. Once again `Sarah Jane' clawed her way heroically back onto the ice covered track. Minutes later it was `Princess' that was threatening to crash hundreds of feet down the mountain to destruction. For the third time I looked over the edge of the mountain from a cab window and surveyed the possibilities. I'd seen better. One wheel in mid air, the other three on ice. No snow chains and the off road design of the tyres about as much use on ice, as a fire extinguisher is in Hell. The mountain track, from the cliff edge, to the towering rock face, less than fifteen feet wide. The drop, a sheer five hundred. I took my only option. Another prayer, another tow and with much churning of tyres, `Princess' slithered her way back on to the road.

By now the drivers were, understandably, keeping well away from the cliff edge. Between the rock face, and the hard

surface of the track, was a soft muddy area, about eighteen inches wide, where water running down the rock face had turned the ground into a quagmire. The inevitable happened. One of the trucks sank up to its axles in the mud. Again we shovelled and towed and again one of our precious trucks fought its way back onto the road. How long would it be before we had a disaster? How long before one of the trucks went over the edge and was lost? The answer turned out to be about thirty five minutes. 'Sarah Jane' slid off the ice covered road and settled swaying, at an impossible angle, halfway over the edge. Keith and Mike climbed down from the cab: Protesting his innocence; Keith promptly fell over on the ice. Ibrahim went to his aid, and also fell heavily to the ground. We couldn't even stand upright on the road it was so slippery. I took one look at poor old 'Sarah Jane', and told Ibrahim that we could not recover her. As I spoke, 'Sarah Jane' slipped another couple of inches, as if to put the matter beyond doubt. With heavy hearts, we transferred her load, and left her there on the mountain, the following trucks inching their way between her suspended front wheel and the rock face.

Only about half a kilometre to go and my spirits were beginning to lift. Could we make it to the end of this nightmare without further incident? Ibrahim had gone ahead to alert the checkpoint of our imminent arrival, and avoid the possibility of us coming under fire from the city's defending soldiers. Our progress had been slow but steady. We had left Sarah Jane to her fate some time ago. We had been on the road for thirteen hours, in temperatures between -5c. and 0c: Eleven times we had stopped to drag one of our trucks from the edge of the precipice or dig one out of the mud and ice. I felt both physically and mentally exhausted. I'd had the nerve racking experience of sitting in the cab of a truck whilst it was towed from the brink of destruction, on five separate occasions. I was soaked to the skin; freezing; and had smoked a hundred cigarettes: My feet were numb with cold, and my vision was getting blurred. Every nerve in my body screamed for the chance to sleep. Troops coming up the mountain had told us we were only about a kilometre above the snow line, and that although the road was running with water, it was wide, and solid! Best of all; it was down hill all the way into Sarajevo!

The truck in front of me stopped. I couldn't see beyond it, but instinct told me to expect the worst. I virtually fell out of the cab. My feet would not function properly; and I stumbled rather than ran towards the front of the convoy. Just around the bend in the road, wedged against a tree five metres down the mountain and with her wheels in the air, was the latest addition to our fleet, 'Vera'. Slipping and sliding, I ran to the scene. I shouted to the other drivers; asking the whereabouts of the driver, Guy. Then I saw him leaning against his toppled truck.

He was OK. Relief washed over me, quickly followed by a flood of anguish! Our latest, and best truck, still and silent and upside down. Mount Igman had warned us, tried us and found us guilty of trespass. It's punishment was slow to mature, but clear cut and final. Even the cargo of food was denied to us and only a few hundred metres to go. It was painfully obvious to everyone that there was nothing to be done except remove the snow chains and leave 'Vera' to be stripped by the mountain troops to help them run their trucks. Most of the food was trapped under the upturned truck and as daylight was fading fast, I made the decision to abandon the site and to make Sarajevo as quickly as possible.

We made the comparatively safe downhill ice free run towards the checkpoint. Down the long exposed straight above the Serb held part of the city, our vulnerability partially covered by the sniper screens that lined the road. As we rounded the hairpin bend at the bottom, we were less than one hundred kilometres from Serb guns, and they gave us a hasty and inaccurate welcome! Within two minutes we were at the checkpoint, and the astounded guards told us that Ibrahim had gone on to Hrasnica, to organize secure parking for the night. They had been surprised when Ibrahim had turned up, but when the rest of the convoy was lined up waiting to cross into the Muslim enclave, they could hardly believe their eyes. I imagined them discussing the Trojan Horse as they checked our trucks! We followed in Ibrahim's tracks, and found him at the Police station. We were taken to the Chief of Police, who welcomed us to Sarajevo, and thanked us for coming! He then informed us that we could not cross the airport at night, (into the city) and that a guide would take us across to the French UN control post there in the morning. We parked our trucks in the Police Station compound, and set about cooking dinner! I shall never forget it. Baked beans and sardines, washed down with coffee, whilst we listened to the evening symphony of 30 mm guns, punctuated by the odd mortar. Every few minutes one of the strings of tracer would arc over our heads, sometimes rattling off the tower block next to which we were parked. I climbed into my cab and spread my sleeping bag across the seats. The Battle of Armageddon itself wouldn't keep me from my sleep that night!

The next morning we made our way to the airport and here with much discussion and examining of papers, the French kept us waiting for quite a while before letting us cross the runway. No one believed our story. One conversation went as follows.

French Foreign Legion Sergeant: 'It eez eempossibeel to drive over zee Montagne!'

Me: 'OK, then how did we get here?'

Sergeant: 'Maybe you are in zee disguise, no?'

Ibrahim: 'Aye! And maybe you thirty five tons of food we bought in the local shop! Don't be a Prat, man!'

Eventually they let us through. We were escorted by a French armoured car across the airport runway, and into the besieged heart of that now infamous city.

We had made it, the first non UN convoy to enter the city for six months. We had broken the Siege of Sarajevo. We had

paved the way and many others would follow in our tyre marks over that brooding mountain. The fighting that ensued over that tenuous link with the outside world would soon become headline news and the name of Mount Igman become known around the Globe. No more would that city be held to ransom under siege!

Of our eight trucks only six made it through. Of the forty tons of food we delivered thirty five. Two thousand one hundred and eighty parcels of food. Enough to feed eight thousand seven hundred and twenty people for a week. `Sarah Jane' and `Vera' became posthumous heroines of the battle against the mountain, and we began to see their loss against a backdrop of shattered buildings and lives, as an inevitable consequence of war.

Once inside the city, we were escorted to the police compound, and given a lunch of soup and bread, and then we were escorted to the Caritas warehouse, where the Mayor, two Nuns, and the Caritas officials, formally welcomed us with a second lunch of bread and soup! The Mayor presented each of us with a little paper `Caritas Sarajevo' sticker. He said they wanted to give us a medal, but he was sorry, and that this was all they had to give us! We were very proud of our paper medals!

The trucks were unloaded and we parked them in the warehouse compound. We had with us about two hundred gallons of diesel, more fuel than in the whole of the city! Armed guards were posted there that night, ensuring that we kept the means to get home again. (Fuel was changing hands at 30 DMs per litre!). A French UN pick up truck took us to our billet for the night; the Catholic Seminary in the old quarter of the city. The Catholic Nuns of Sarajevo looked after us that night; hot baths, beautifully cooked meals, and real beds. All this in the middle of a hungry, war torn city. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

In the morning, after a hot shower and another good feed, we discussed the situation we were in. Having lost two trucks on the mountain; and been lucky not to lose any men; going back that way was a non starter. An empty Bedford is not a good vehicle in the snow and ice! The tractor type tyres don't grip, and the hard suspension makes the truck's front end tend to slide at every opportunity! It needs some weight in the back to hold it to the road. There were no voices raised suggesting a trip back over Igman! The only alternative was to go back via the Serb controlled area of Ilidja, and chance being subject to the wrath of the Serbs, whom we had cheated out of what they considered to be their due! /p>

We set off for the checkpoint at Ilidja, reaching it at five minutes to eight. A blonde female guard of about twenty five, came out of the little hut that was their post. We were surprised to see that there was only one other soldier on the site. They were the night shift. The day shift started at eight. After a brief examination of our papers and the trucks, they waved us through. As I drove through the checkpoint, (tail end Charlie, my usual position!) I could see the day shift of about ten men coming across from the village. When we eventually got back to our base in Dugi Rat, we learned that the Serb's (day shift!) had arrested the whole of the next convoy that came through Ilidja. This was a French UN affiliated convoy, whom they accused of smuggling arms into the city. They said that the French had gone over the mountain to avoid their checkpoints. They had mistaken the French convoy for us! These poor souls were held hostage for several weeks, and only released when the French government stumped up several thousand DM's for each of them. Yet another close encounter with disaster, but such are the fortunes of war!

Our trip back was as uneventful as an eighteen hour dash through a war zone can be, and the only hitch that we suffered was one of the `Oxford' trucks lost an engine pulley, just north of Konjic. We left it with the (Muslim) engineers of the ever obliging Malbat, who nursed it back to health!

How can I describe the men and machines who laboured long and hard that cold April day on Mount Igman? Ibrahim and Guy went back to the mountain, and talked the Norwegian contingent of the UN who were stationed near the Olympic Village, into helping them recover `Sarah Jane'. This they did successfully. They later went back with another of the drivers, Mike, to attempt to recover `Vera' or strip her of usable parts. All this in sub Zero temperatures, with the Serb army just minutes away!. They, and the other drivers who guided their trucks along that tortuous mountain track, are typical of the unpaid volunteer work force of the charity and Non Governmental Organizations. Dedicated unsung heroes all of them. They all deserve a medal, but so rarely get a mention in the annals of this latest Balkan Bloodbath. The trucks deserve a mention as well. Built for the British Army by Vauxhall Motors, the Bedford MK and MJ series trucks have served for thirty years in many countries around the world. They are reliable and efficient and have earned a reputation as outstanding tough, off road workhorses. Long may they serve in their new role as Humanitarian Aid Transports! They are now obsolete, and are being replaced by a 4 x 4 Leyland four tonner, which will find the old M series a tough act to follow indeed. Truly a legend in their own lunchtime! But what of the mountain? Like the rest of us, Mount Igman just waits for the Day of Judgement and in the mean time makes the odd day or so hell for the unsuspecting transport manager!

Absent Friends

I hope you found my recollections of 1994 of interest. It's been very kind of you to get this far! Indulge me just a little longer, dear reader, as the human face of this war appears out of the smoke of battle and the mists of time.

Should I ever, as an old man, find myself sitting in a rocking chair, on the porch of a house somewhere, my mind will go

back to Sarajevo, it's people, and the convoys. In particular I shall remember Edisa Rahman, then a young girl of about ten. When we eventually, got off Mount Igman that day, and were eating our dinner outside the police station in Hrasnica, she came and shared a cup of coffee with us, and befriended me. Her shy smile was like a glittering moonbeam, in what was a very dark night indeed. I went to Sarajevo several more times after that, and each time, without fail she sought me out to greet me; bringing that beautiful smile with her. She told me that she lived with her mother, and that three times a week they went together to Kosovo Hospital to see if there was any medicine to help her mother, who had 'a thing growing in her head'. I asked what other family, she had. She told me of her brother, who was in a Serb prison camp in Pale. Her father, whom she had not seen for six months, was up on the mountain fighting the 'Chetniks', I wonder when she found out that the defenders of Sarajevo came home at least once a week? Each time she came to greet me after that, I sent her home to her mother with tins of peaches or fish, with packets of pasta, sugar or flour and bottles of vegetable oil. At least they could eat sometimes.

The last time I saw Edisa, was on July 28th, 1994. She waved goodbye to me as I left her behind in that shattered city. One last time over Mount Igman, on my way back to Split, and then onto Britain and home. For me it was easy, just drive out of there. For Edisa, I think the future may have been just a little more difficult. (Make Dua's for her and her mother, dear reader, for they are our Sisters in Islam.)

Having resisted the temptation to smuggle her out with me, (we'd got people in and out of the city several times before) we raced out of the city and up onto the Mountain. It was a case of getting out while we could, between the bouts of shelling and mortar fire. A one way journey home! On the lower slopes of the Mountain a petrol tanker burned, a UN truck, its cab and driver blasted by Serb 30 mm cannon fire, partially blocked the road. Two other trucks, riddled with bullet holes and incinerated by the fireball blast from the tanker, bore witness to the Serb's determination to once more put a stranglehold on the city. They failed, and as a consequence, lost the bargaining chip that they had held for so long. (Not long after, a truce was declared and the war came slowly to an end).

The Serbs shelled the road whenever they thought they could do it without fear of retaliation. (They were always wrong!) The road grew wider and more dangerous with each passing week, but still the Aid Convoys rolled along it. Occasionally the Bosnian Government troops had to close the road as fighting raged across it. The Convoys waited for a lull, and then rolled right on into the city again. Ibrahim and his convoy were in town when the shelling started again in earnest. The road was closed, and they were trapped for ten days. Their white painted trucks were just too good a target, even for Serb gunners to miss! After a lot of discussion, they decided to leave the trucks, and the convoy crew would walk out of the city, twenty odd kilometres over the Mountain, under cover of darkness, and hitch a lift back to their base near Split. Two of the crew would remain behind and each night, take two trucks over the mountain, leaving one to be collected later. It was Ibrahim, and Tony Richards, (who was now doing my old job) that stayed behind. A few nights later, having left a truck for collection, they were driving back over Mount Igman. It was a dark, wet August night and the rain had eased for a few minutes. The road was slippery and they were driving without lights, trying to pass unnoticed. They didn't. The first that they knew of their predicament, was the string of tracer bullets that flashed in front of them, destroying their night vision. The Serb gunner (as usual) missed, but the damage was done. The truck's offside front wheel dropped off the edge of the road, and despite Ibrahim's attempt to get her back onto it, 'Samantha' the latest addition to the fleet, plunged over the cliff, and crashed five hundred feet to destruction.

The French found Ibrahim and Tony the next day. Two more victims of the war in Bosnia.

They died helping others to live. A sacrifice made by many over the centuries, but each time that sacrifice is made, the rest of us who live on to tell the tale, should feel a little humbled, and recognize that whilst 'some people achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them', there are just a few, who achieve it in death. Ibrahim Shaheed was shipped back to the UK by the French contingent of the UN, and is buried in the Muslim cemetery in his home town of Glasgow. Because of the UN involvement we were unable to bury him where he fell, as is customary for Muslims who fall on the battlefield. We covered him with Bosnian soil from Mount Igman, when we laid his body in it's grave.

May Allah grant him the reward of Paradise and give the rest of us that same success, on the Day of Judgement. Allahu Akbar!

Food for Thought

A few weeks before our visit to Sarajevo, I had taken part of our convoy to a town called Konjic. Here I had arranged to meet the Imam of the town's Grand Masjid with two truck loads of aid. One truck was loaded with food; and the other with surgical equipment, and dressings etc., for the local hospital.

One of the strictest rules governing the distribution of Aid is that it must go only to civilians and not to fighting troops. The authorities in Croatia, who had begrudgingly allowed us to cross into Bosnia had only done so because the Aid was consigned to an Imam. A man of God, in the eyes of the Catholic Croats, is an acceptable recipient of Humanitarian Aid and can be relied on to distribute it in accordance with the Geneva Convention. It came as no surprise to me, however, to find that Imam Muderis, was the commander of the 500 or so strong local force of Mujahadeen. Most of these were Bosnians, who lived in Konjic, ' but a few of them were from various other Muslim countries. They all spent twelve hours

on the mountain, holding off the Serb forces and twelve hours off duty in their homes in the town. Their wounds were treated in the local hospital, and they ate at home. I suppose it is fair to say that the aid was delivered to the civilians in the town, and the medical aid definitely went to the hospital!

As cosmopolitan as this small fighting force was, the only English speaking man they had was a fifteen year old, who was up on the mountain when we arrived. I went with one of the commanders to find him. We took the first kilometre or so in style. A Mercedes Benz 300 series with bullet holes in the bodywork, and one very disturbingly placed one in the windscreen! . The last few hundred metres we made on foot, and I had just one or two butterflies fluttering around inside by the time we reached the trenches that were the front line! After asking around for a couple of minutes, we discovered that our interpreter was at the time some hundred or so metres in front of the trenches we were in with the rest of his platoon. Apparently it was their custom to cut a `Chetnik' throat or two before Dhohar Salat and again before Isha! Eventually, our interpreter appeared from amongst the trees, and greeted us with a salaam. When he learned that he was to come back to the Mosque, to interpret for the Imam, he handed his AK-47 to a colleague, and we set off for the town. On the journey back, I asked him how long he had been on the mountain. He told me that he had first gone to the front line two years ago. He had been just thirteen years old when he had killed his first Chetnik. I asked him if he was ever afraid. His response was to give me a quizzical look and reply, 'Only of Allah'. Something in his voice told me that this was not just teenage bravado.

I hope, dear Brothers and Sisters in Islam, you and I would be able to say the same.

Explanations!

Convoy of Mercy is a Muslim organization that used a mix of Muslims {particularly British reverts} and non Muslims, to enable them to access the war zone. At times, a Muslim name in a passport was enough to get you shot! A passport with an English or Christian name in it was another matter. Rasulullah, Peace be upon Him, said `War is deceit' and this was our way of getting in and out of the War Zone with much needed Humanitarian Aid.

Throughout Bosnia, and indeed most of the Balkans, the German Deutschmark {DM} is widely used, and had virtually replaced the Bosnian Dinar.

Pronunciations! Sarajevo - Sarra-yeah-vo Konjic - Con-yits Jablanica - Yab-len-eetsa Tarcin - Tar-chin Hrasnica - Her-as-neetsa Croats - Crow-ats Omis - Omish Ploce - Plotch-ay Doljani - Doll -yarnee Pale - Parlay Metkovic - Met-co-vitch Ilidja - Ill-id-yar

Our Trucks all had names. They were named after various sisters, and daughters, and most of them had been translated into English to avoid arousing suspicion. For example, `Princess' was named after our Bosnian refugee housekeeper's eldest daughter, Almeira. Her youngest daughter, Amina, had `Verity' named after her. In total we had eight trucks by the time I came home in August of 1994. All of them were named in this way.

Ibrahim Shaheed went over the edge of Mount Igman in `Samantha', which, was named after his niece. `Verity' was lost on Mount Igman, as recounted earlier.

Ibrahim Shaheed, was a Scots revert, from Glasgow. He had taken the name of `Ibrahim Mohammed', and had kept his family name of Golightly. I never knew his age, but he was about 28. He lived and worked in North London before going for Jihad in November 1993. He was a keen Rugby Football player, and followed the game enthusiastically. He stood about six feet two inches tall, and weighed about fourteen stones. He would give way to nothing. Alhamdulillah, he had a determination to fulfill his role in Bosnia, that can only be admired.

As the Convoy Leader, Ibrahim Shaheed was responsible for about three thousand tons of Humanitarian Aid being transported across the confrontation lines, into the war zone in Central Bosnia.

Thank you, dear reader, for your time and patience. You were very kind to listen to my ramblings, which were probably not as interesting to you, as I would think!

As the millennium draws to a close, and brings down the curtain on this act of the Great Play, these writings form part of the history of the times we lived in.

May Allah forgive us all.

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