

PROLOGUE

Bosnia, Summer 1993

I'll drive,' I argued. I wasn't in a good mood that morning. Robert had woken me up at about 3 a.m., coming into my room pissed and wanting a chat. He always got pissed when he was feeling low. It was his escape. There were many times when the pressures on us were just too great, the problems too insurmountable, the experiences too horrific, so turning to alcohol seemed the only way out and the only way to forget. Temporarily anyway.

We were both tired, we needed a break and had decided that after this trip we would go back to our apartment on the Island of Krk for a couple of days of rest, then drive back to the UK for a week or two off.

Krk was great - our sunny little haven away from the daily atrocities and carnage we witnessed in this disgusting war in Bosnia. In Krk we could rest, go swimming, sailing and scuba diving, sit in the restaurants and bars at night and drink and talk, and go back and fuck our Croatian girlfriends. But we were both exhausted, we desperately needed to just get away from everything and everyone, we both desperately needed a rest.

Krk hadn't really been affected too much by the war. There hadn't been much fighting on the island itself, although there were various tales of the occasional spurt of gunfire, but so little compared with much of Croatia. However there were many hundreds of refugees continually streaming onto the island and the Red Cross centres were running at full steam trying to house and feed them as well as getting medical treatment to those that required it, and trying to search for lost relatives and friends. But walking through Krk, even during the height of the war, it was hard to imagine that just a few miles away men were fighting, women were being systematically raped and children were being slaughtered. It was a contrast that was almost impossible to comprehend.

We felt that by getting away from Krk we would be getting away from everything - a kind of cleansing of our minds. We wanted to get back to normality, to the security and stability that only our own country and our own

environment could give us. Just one more job then we could go home and we were both looking forward to it so very much.

'No, listen - I'll drive there and you drive back, ok?' Robert replied. He was also getting annoyed - neither of us was in the mood to argue. Robert was moody at the best of times so, feeling as I knew he did that morning, I decided to end this conversation once and for all.

'Look,' I said firmly, 'it was you that was on the piss last night, you're the one feeling like shit this morning, you sleep now, I'll drive there and you drive back. No more arguments, ok?' Then I added for good measure, but with a touch of sarcasm, 'Pisshead.'

'Pisshead' was the last word Robert heard.

We had just finished strapping down our load. The journey we were to take was not a long one and we had already completed it a couple of times previously, but it was probably one of the most dangerous journeys at that time during the conflict in Bosnia. Like the previous two trips, it was making us both a little edgy and a little nervous. It was going to be another mad dash down the motorway that led from Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, to Belgrade the capital of Serbia. For about 70 miles we had to drive straight along the front line. Few, apart from us, were stupid enough to take such a journey. The evidence of those that had was left by the side of the road: burned-out buses, bullet-ridden cars, dead and decomposing bodies.

Most people wanting to get to the eastern side of Croatia took the long route; turning north at Kutina, then east at Virovitica over the conflict zone to Nasice or Osijek and back down, but that added about four to six hours onto the journey each way which we were not prepared to take.

As per the previous two trips, we were tasked to take medicine into a town near to Brod, about 120 miles down the motorway from Zagreb. This small, once pretty town was divided into two by the river, one side in Bosnia and in Serbian territory and the other side in Croatia.

A little ornamental bridge, long since demolished, used to span the river and for decades both sides lived peacefully with each other. But now the two

were divided - those who were friends were now enemies, those who were loved were now hated.

We were delivering aid into the Croatian side, directly on the front line and under continual mortar bombardment, which kept everyone but the most foolhardy sheltered in their cellars or bunkers. Few people had an opportunity to safely enter or leave this little town - it was effectively cut off because of the continual and indiscriminate mortar attacks.

The first time we had arrived, about two months ago, Robert got out of the pickup and said, 'Where the fuck is everyone?'

We had found our way to the centre of the town looking for the hospital, where we were to deliver our consignment. Typically in eastern Europe, the centre consisted of a large paved square, which became the main meeting place; children could play, lovers could meet, the old could reminisce and friends could sit over a coffee and watch the world go by.

However, the day we first arrived the town was deserted. We didn't fully understand why until another barrage of mortars rocked the town, causing us to run frantically for cover. We lay flat against a low wall which was the boundary to what we imagined was once a bustling cafe and restaurant but now just a burnt-out, blackened, shrapnel-scarred, windowless shell.

We had planned this first trip in advance so we knew roughly where the hospital was. We had both had extensive experience in the protection and security industry, taking us into many strange and sometimes hostile countries around the world. We were used to forward planning and total preparation, and realized its absolute importance in the success of any mission, and on this first trip to Brod we had made no exception.

The bombardment lasted about ten minutes. We lay cowering with our hands over our heads, praying that a mortar shell wouldn't blow us to pieces. Then there seemed to be more time between explosions -it seemed to have calmed a little - so I signalled to Robert and we dashed back to our vehicle, which thankfully had not been hit, and raced towards what we had hoped was the

general direction of the hospital. We had become a little disoriented and so it was purely by chance that we saw the hospital sign.

The town's hospital wasn't a big building and looked to have once had two or three floors, but most of the upper levels had been destroyed. The ground floor was surrounded and enveloped by a wall of sandbags to the height of the top of the ground floor windows. There was a makeshift vehicle ramp running under a canopy to an open, doorless entrance.

As we turned into the hospital gates, raced across the short drive and up the ramp to the entrance it seemed that most of the medical staff were waiting at the doorway.

As we pulled up to the doors, medics rushed urgently round our vehicle thinking we were the first casualties of this barrage. We quickly told them of our delivery, and the look of urgency and confusion in their faces rapidly turned to relief and delight.

We jumped out of our vehicle, raced round to the sides and, as quickly as we could, untied the straps and pulled off the tarpaulin. The doctor in charge ordered the staff to unload the vehicle, which took just a few minutes as they all ran with the boxes inside the building and down to a lower floor. The ground floor was just an empty shell too.

The doctor ordered an orderly to get us some tea.

However, almost as soon as the pickup was unloaded the casualties started to arrive. Standing at the entrance to the hospital we could hear them before we saw them; the screeching of tyres, the high revs and the crunching of gears as vehicles, with their bleeding and dying casualties inside, made their mad dash to the hospital. Brothers, wives, husbands, sons, daughters and friends: they just kept coming. We rushed to the Toyota and quickly moved it off the ramp just in time to see the first vehicle come through the hospital gates. We jumped out and stood briefly at the entrance as we watched the car pull up.

A man, his white shirt and bare arms completely covered in blood, jumped out of the back seat screaming and crying and clutching what must have been his seven- or eight-year-old daughter. She lay motionless in his arms. We looked

at her pretty little face, bright yellow ribbons tied neatly in her braided hair, her beautiful yellow and blue flowery summer dress and a bloody pulpy mess where the base of her legs should have been. '

In stunned silence we got back into our vehicle, fighting back our tears and quickly drove off. We promised ourselves that if we were ever asked to come here again, we would. Without hesitation or doubt and regardless of whether we might ourselves one day be a casualty in a vehicle screeching its way to hospital. We would return ...

So this was now our third trip and after securing our load with a final tug of the rope, we jumped into the Toyota Hi-Lux and set off out of the compound. Although the load capacity wasn't great, the Toyota was an ideal vehicle for much of the terrain in Bosnia as it enabled us to deliver emergency aid and supplies into places to where most other vehicles struggled to get.

We also had our fake Red Cross ID cards and documents, as well as having Red Cross symbols stuck on the car doors and bonnet. We'd had the fake documents prepared on a previous brief trip to the UK for a special operation we had been asked to do; smuggling an elderly Croatian family from the front line back through Bosnia to their family and children in Croatia.

Apart from delivering aid to various Red Cross officers throughout Bosnia and Croatia, we were not nor had ever been members of the Red Cross, nor had we ever worked for the Red Cross, but we thought that by pretending to be their UK representatives in the Balkans it would give us immunity to being targeted and attacked. We were right, and it had saved our lives on more than one occasion and had helped us immeasurably on many others. However if we had ever been found out we would have been shot on the spot.

Our normal routine, once we had left Zagreb and had passed the last UN checkpoint before entering no man's land, was to open the windows fully, open the doors on to the first catch and drive as fast as we could with music blaring until we got to the other end. The reason for opening the windows was to minimize injuries from flying glass should we be shot at, and by opening the doors to the first latch, it dispersed the pressure inside the vehicle slightly should

we drive over a land mine. Instead of the explosion being contained inside the vehicle it would be forced out. However, we would still be pretty fucked.

Also, on both previous trips, we had turned the radio up loud and sung at the tops of our voices throughout the journey, both to humour ourselves and to keep our minds off the possible dangers ahead. Not only were we travelling along the front line, but also we were going into a town under heavy bombardment. For some reason neither of us felt like singing that morning; Robert was nursing a bad hangover and felt unusually low and depressed and I was unnervingly preoccupied with my thoughts. For some reason this trip didn't feel right.

We had got to know the Lebanese UN soldiers at the last checkpoint quite well. We had always stopped and joined them for a tea - both on the way out and on our return - as on our last two visits the same guys had been on duty on both occasions. We would chat and laugh and swap photos of girlfriends and family and then, just before setting off, they would always gravely warn us not to take the trip, telling us that we were foolish and stupid. As we left and warmly shook hands they would call us their stupid and crazy British friends. Later in the evening, on our way home, they would view us zooming towards them through their binoculars. They would all cheer, put a pot of water on their one-ringed stove and have sweet, hot, black tea ready and waiting as we arrived.

But today was different. As we approached our friends at the UN checkpoint for the third time Robert and I still hadn't said a word to each other but we were both looking forward to a nice cup of tea before commencing our journey. It would put us at ease but as we approached the barrier immediately rose. We looked at each other confused, shrugged and drove slowly past the bunker looking in, hoping we would be stopped and beckoned over for our traditional cuppa.

But we didn't recognize any of the soldiers on duty, they didn't even stop us, they just stood at the entrance, nodded sternly and waved us through. My instinct told me something wasn't right. Our routine had been disturbed and it worried me that things were not as usual.

The most critical and dangerous time on this motorway route was as we passed the tollbooths. All the booths were destroyed and of course abandoned, and it was here that we saw most burnt-out vehicles and dead bodies. Although the booths themselves were all but destroyed, the concrete bollards for the cars to pass between remained. The gap was too small to drive through at speed; an error of just a few centimetres would have been catastrophic. There was no way to pass through quickly, and we had no choice but to slow right down to around ten miles an hour and squeeze through.

The first booth was about seven miles past the last UN checkpoint, and we passed through it without problems. As we sped up I turned the radio on to give us some background music, as driving along this stretch of road was unnerving and uncomfortable. Even if neither of us were in the mood to sing, I still wanted something to listen to.

The second booth was about 30 miles further down the motorway. I slowed right down, inched through the narrow gap and suddenly I heard a sharp 'crack' and felt a splash of wetness on my cheek and neck.

'Fuck!' I shouted as we went through the booth. The car jolted and I felt what must have been another round slam into it. We were being shot at.

'Fuck!' I shouted, 'Fuck, lets get the fuck out of here!' Concentrating on the road ahead, I slammed my foot hard on the accelerator as we went through the gap.

I didn't understand what had splashed against my cheek, it didn't register until I looked round at Robert. He was lying back, eyes wide open, and the front part of his forehead was missing. The back window was red with his blood. Robert had been shot in the head.

'No!' I shouted, over and over again. I wiped my cheek with my hand and looked down at it. It was covered with his blood and brains.

'Robert!' I screamed and turned to look at him once more. There was a tear running down his cheek.

I didn't know what to do. I wouldn't stop; I couldn't. I reached down and turned the music on loud and I just drove and drove, as fast as I could.

I drove for what seemed like an eternity. I drove with my best friend dead next to me. I could smell his death. With tears streaming down my cheeks, and fixated on the road ahead, I cried uncontrollably until I reached Brod. I didn't want to look round, I didn't want to look at him again, I couldn't accept that my dear friend and colleague was dead next to me with his blood and brains dribbling down my shoulder.

As I approached the hospital entrance the staff immediately recognized our vehicle. They waved and smiled. They were eagerly awaiting their next delivery of medicine and supplies.

As I slowed in front of the hospital entrance the same doctor, who always seemed to be on duty, walked to the vehicle. He waved happily and smiled at first, before opening the door and finding my new delivery.

I came home soon after.

Doing the Doors

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