

Bosnia, Easter 2001

by Phil Williams

Another convoy for me - this time with Hope and Aid Direct, and sharing a truck with the Beehive Inn, from Swindon. That is, myself and Andy Mercer, the pub covered the approximate £2,000 cost of the trip.

My co-driver was a Beehive regular, Paul Clifford from Swindon, a 60 year old retired electrician and one-time hippy. He lives partly in Swindon, partly in Greece and partly in Canary Islands dependent on the time of year!

We started from Cardiff on 7 April, staying overnight in Swindon for a few Beehive pints before heading for the foot and mouth disinfection at a farm close to Hythe in Kent, where we also met up with the other four lorries on the trip.

We were using the charity's own truck that had been donated originally by SEABOARD, and was now shared between Hope and Aid Direct and other charities. The truck lived in Rochester, Kent and Paul collected it before starting to fill it in Swindon and then bringing it to Cardiff for me to complete the filling on 6 April. Our starting kilometrage was 366,041. On Sunday, 8 April we had reached Môtis in Belgium, when Paul noticed our brakes were seizing up. We checked them out with a local breaker's yard, before deciding to continue. It appeared that the problem was intermittent and as long as we didn't use the hand brake it disappeared. So, we went all the way to Bosnia without using the hand brake! The REME local repair staff fixed the problem in Banja Luka - our Bosnian base for three days

We stopped for about four hours sleep in Limburg before proceeding along the German autobahns. At this point, our leader, Chas Storer reported to us the Bosnian Croat unrest a few days ago as reported by CNN on the Internet.

Late on 9 April we arrived at Gralla on the Austrian/Slovenian border, where all 12 of us Conveyers had the first chance to relax and meet each other properly. We had an excellent meal at about 10 pm with wine and beer and many dirty jokes. An excellent couple of hours of camaraderie.

On 10 April we started a little later than expected at 10 am to head for the Slovenia border and onwards across Slovenia and into Croatia. We cleared the various border controls by 3 pm and headed for Zagreb and the Croatian Customs clearance. As we were too late for customs clearance today we visited Gorna Bistjra Hospital for brain damaged and Spina Bifida children. I had been here twice before, and was impressed that it was now operating to a much better standard than in 1995 and 1997. There were more staff, better beds/cots and generally much cleaner, with painted walls etc. It was great to see such improvement and all the children were really glad to see us.

On all the convoys we always take ourselves and Aid DIRECT to the needy - in this case the children.

After this we went to another hospital around Zagreb, in Donja Stubica. This was a mental hospital, where once again we were made welcome by staff and patients. Here we met some real characters - the patients. One lovely short dumpy lady, about 4' 10", took an immediate liking to our Will. Will from Liphook is 25 year old, about 6' tall, skinny and unshaven. Marina liked to hug him around the bum and pick him up - she really was strong. She was wearing a large badge in English saying "Why Be Normal?"!!

Another patient, to my great surprise as I was handing out sweets, replied in perfect BBC English, "Thank you". I got talking to him and discovered he had learnt English in a proper school in Rijeka and knew quite a lot of English phrases rather than full command of the language. All the phrases he knew he was using in the right context. He created a real stir as he walked past us saying "I like your trousers" in perfect accented English. As he got to know us he started acting homosexual and passed comments such as "nice bottom" to a few of our men. When I tried to converse with him, if he didn't understand he just walked away with a big smile - and then return with a phrases like "Nice cup of tea". He truly was a star and was enjoying himself immensely. Apparently he was homosexual and aged 29.

All the patients helped us unload the Aid and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. We left them and got back onto the Zagreb motorway to spend the night in the services after a mediocre British standard motorway services meal. As I was climbing into the back of my lorry around 11.30 pm for sleep, two local Police came over for a chat.

They told me they were on foot patrol for the night as this Services area was where many lorries stopped - often carrying illegal immigrants. Only last week, one of the cops had discovered 25 Chinese in a four tonne truck and before that the other cop had found 15 Indians in a truck. They were young family men, keen to speak in English and while away the night with me. They told me the main offenders for carrying immigrants were Turks, Serbs and Bulgars.

Anyway, next morning, 11 April we reported to Zagreb Customs at 9 am and got away by 11 am heading for the Catholic Orphanage in the city. We had to cross the city with a massive amount of traffic. Zagreb has an extensive tram network that seemed very popular and efficient.

At the orphanage, run by nuns we were warmly greeted and left a good supply of mainly food. The orphanage was well run, well decorated, but the five trucks had a great time turning and returning back through the Zagreb traffic.

The nuns had laid on an excellent meal for us of noodle soup, pork and roast potatoes with lettuce and it was lovely. We even had a dessert of cake and all washed down with wine, water or beer. I got locked in the lavatory to cause a good laugh.

Still, onward we must go to Vukovar, which is a town of 30,000 people before the war that is right on the Border with Serbia.

Arrived in Vukovar around 6pm to be met by our hosts, ADRA - the Adventist Church led by the two padres, Marina and Damir. These two were to be our hosts, guides and interpreters for three days.

They took us to their church where they presented us with another three course meal! We had to eat it, but it was simple but excellent food.

When the meal was over we met our individual hosts for the three days and nights. I was billeted with Paul, Will and Dave with Bora our local driver. He was to take us to our 'digs' in the village of Borovo just outside Vukovar. The digs were the home of Dragana's elderly Mum and Dad in a gorgeous old bungalow as shown in the next two photos as were leaving Vukovar:



Bora, our driver on left with Dragana's Mum and dad in the centre



Paul, my co-driver posing with the kids



Grandma baby-sitting Dragana's two boys. The elder could speak some English at 6 year old!



Before we retired we had a couple of beers in the Hotel Dunay, that had been re-built since the war and was now very smart and welcoming. There was a Rock 'n Roll retirement party taking place and we all joined in the singing of Beatles and Elvis songs with the solo artiste - he even did some requests for our Lin.

That night I slept like a log for seven hours solid.

Early start at about 8 am to the VELEPROMET yard where we would unload our lorries into the large, empty warehouse. Once unloaded the goods were sorted and made into family packs for distribution, with each large box containing food, toiletries, disinfectants and the like.

In the afternoon we re-loaded the food packs and went around Vukovar guided by the padre, Damir, to the houses he felt needed the Aid most. All of the recipients were extremely grateful and made us very welcome. Damir was quick to point out that the people receiving the handouts were not members of his congregation, they were of all religions including Serbs.

ADRA also have their own warehouse and we put at least a lorry load into here for subsequent distribution by Damir and his team of workers. At the back of our truck we found far more boxes of plastic plates than we had imagined - what were we to do with hundreds of boxes of 12 dinner plates?

The weather was beautiful and I was working topless in the yard. We put a lot more plates on the Bad Girls lorry for delivery to Bosnia.

Our trucks all had CB names:

Robin Hood - Chas and Bev - our leader
Sheriff of Nottingham - Steve Tarpey, Dave and Will - from Liphook
Busby - Tom, from Reading, Lin from Buckingham and Paul Evans from Cardiff
Bad Girls - Maggie from Cardiff and Colleen from Quincy, California
Road Runner - Paul from Swindon and Phil from Cardiff

Many other items transferred to Sheriff as he was also going into Bosnia - sealed! We all spent the evening in Mira's house for a meal cooked and served by her. Mira was one of the church workers who had helped all day and she lived in a fifth floor flat. How she managed to cook a three-course meal for about 20 people in a one-bedroom flat I cannot understand - but she did! And it was great. Apparently Mira was an unemployed Teacher who couldn't get a job as she was a Serb. She had two married daughters and a married son with a Downs Syndrome daughter living at home with her. Her daughter was lovely.

At the meal we met Bora's 17 year old son who spoke excellent English that he had learnt from the TV and computers. Bora then chauffeured us back to our digs yet again - and then collected us at 6.30 next morning.

Today, 13th April is Good Friday to us, but Big Friday to the Croats. Our truck is allocated to the village of ILOK, where there is mass unemployment due to a factory closing down - about 90% of adults have no job. So we go to the kindergarten school, that was originally a 17th century hunting lodge. We hand over lots of toys, 90 of Lin's food parcels and some clothes and bedding. Damir has arranged for the local parents to collect the items from the school, but not many had turned up as it was Big Friday, so most children were not in school. We handed out a plastic bum bag to each child in school.

Incidentally diesel is 53 Kuna (50p) a litre and cigarettes 10 Kuna (£1) for 20.

I was in Zeljko's car We were led to this small town by Damir and Zeljko - and we learnt some of Zeljko's background. Zeljko's war story is fascinating:

Before the war Vukovar was headquarters of the Bata Shoe Corporation that employed over 20,000 people in the one factory. He was a senior executive - he is now about 45 years old, and a real pin-up of a man who smokes heavily. But he was the silent star as he ferried us, translated for us, gave us gifts and nothing was too much trouble for him. Him and Damir were always available for helping us.

Anyway, during the war he harboured four Serb colleagues in his basement and was betrayed by one of their sons. He was taken prisoner and made a prisoner of war, even though he was a civilian. He was sent to a concentration camp in Serbia, where he suffered badly.

Now back to the diary. As we were returning from Ilok, Zeljko took a detour and pointed out where he had been kept overnight by the Serbs, in farm outbuildings, along with 250 other men.

He told us to remember that farm as he would explain later. So he led us, way out in the country to this memorial field.

Zeljko told us he had been loaded into a lorry, with many others and driven a short distance from the farm. At the turning off the main road to this field the Croat soldier driving the lorry in front deliberately went the wrong way and Zeljko's lorry followed the lorry in front. All the other lorries went into this field where, hidden in a copse were Serb soldiers, who shot and killed every man that dismounted from the lorry.

We then returned to Vukovar and I saw the devastation again. Apparently Vukovar received 90% war damage to properties. The war finished 6 years ago (in 1995) and yet the population of the town is still only 10,000 compared to the 30,000 before the war. The main employer, the shoe factory is now employing about 400 people compared to 20,000 plus.



One tree has been planted here for each man kill at this spot



Notice bullet holes on walls, roofs missing and flats behind still devastated



A closer view of some flats—that are still occupied and the bullets on the garage



Notice the yellow building has been refurbished, as it was worse than the others!



Front view—taken from outside the smart new hotel!



Back view—people live here—its better than nothing!

Our last evening in Vukovar and we all eat in a fish restaurant at the side of the Danube. All our hosts are there, some with family. The table is set for about 24 people with knives, forks and spoons. But we only get bread and delicious fish soup. The peppery soup contains lots of fish steaks and includes bones galore. We ask what fish and are told the black skin is eel and the other is carp, fresh from the Danube. Paul, Paul and myself have two helpings as Paul Evans has been before so warns us not to expect another course - the knives and forks are a decoy!

After the meal and much beer and wine - none of our hosts drink alcohol as the Adventists do not touch anything with alcohol or caffeine in it, we are entertained by two guitarists. These two guys are wonderful and play British Rock 'n Roll as well as Croat folk songs. Paul Evans does a lovely cabaret act to finish and we all depart around midnight. Outside, from the trucks we pass food parcels and gifts to our drivers and load food parcels into the cars for our hosts at home.

The Croat for "Cheers" is "Givelet"

Two of the trucks were left outside the hotel for sober collection in the morning. At 10am on Saturday 14th April, we head off to Bosnia with three empty trucks and two well-sealed rucks, via Vinkovci and Zupankha.

Still much devastation along the way including bridges blown and replaced by Bailey bridges from the NATO forces. We pass over the River Vuka, which is a tributary of the Danube. (Rijeka is Croat for river).

We see lots of storks nesting on old buildings and even walking around the deserted and damaged streets.

On this part of the trip we saw our first mine fields

Just outside Bosnia we start to see SFOR - Stabilisation Force. The first ones we met were Hungarian troops. Once inside Bosnia and in particular Banja Luka it was primarily British, Dutch, Canadian and Czech troops. All the main routes in Bosnia have been signed with English/American names, such as Howdy, Pelican, Bluebird as Bosnian names use the Cyrillic alphabet, whereas in Croatia the alphabet is Arabic

At 2.20 pm we reach the Bosnian border to see loads and loads of cars parked on the Croatian side with people walking over the border and coming back with shopping - it must be a lot cheaper in Bosnia! Five litre bottles of squash seemed particularly popular.

Refugees were even asking us if they could get into our cabs to cross the border back into Bosnia! Obviously trying to get back home, but probably got no papers as they lost them when they first ran from home.

The River Sava separates Croatia from Bosnia and we sat over it for ages waiting to get into Bosnia. The border road took us directly into the border town centre - no countryside here, it was straight into the town.

We were sprayed with disinfectant yet again, having driven over many pads on all borders. It took us 5 hours to clear the border controls as we sat in the yard while Steve and Chas persuaded the Customs to let us go! And when we were released the worker told us to go right, and right again, while Chas decided to go left! We were lost almost immediately and five 7.5 tonne trucks were driving around a housing estate for 10 minutes.

About 8 o'clock we all arrived in Banja Luka Metal factory - the home of the SFOR forces. We were met by Andy (radio technician in a Sunderland shirt) and Andy (Lance-Bombardier from Newport). A couple of beers and we were set up in a huge transit tent outside the main factory as the inside Transit tent had said "reserved for PWRR". We should have used the inside tent as we were entitled to!

The temperature dropped in the night to well below freezing - my guess -50C!! We were all tired and bloody cold, but survived.

Next day, 15 April, Easter Sunday, we spent all day hanging around as Bad Girls and Sheriff couldn't be cleared at Customs until Monday - and then as it was Easter Monday even this was doubtful. We all made a few good contacts including the Padre, Norman doing a Masters degree thesis from York University, WO1 Garry Davey (Royal Green Jackets), and WARISA of Wigan (explained later).

We ought to consider arranging with the Royal Logistic Corps for the WARISA haulage company to bring out some of our aid - we have always got too much - I'll detail the concept in an email to Chas and Tom and see if Chas can get something done.

Easter Monday, 16th April 2001 - at last we get out to the people. Bad Girls, Sheriff and Robin Hood have to go to Customs to be cleared. We were to deliver to selected "collection points" as defined by G5 staff - Cpl Paul and Capt Ron of Dutch forces

Maggie and I had the idea last night to collect all the leftovers from our mess (Other Ranks mess). She arranged this with the cook in charge and we collected containers of ratatouille, chips, pasta, cheese,..... before we left the camp.

We visited 4 of these locations guided by Cpl Paul, who had also taken us out six months ago. (He was leaving the Dutch army in three weeks time).

Visit 1

We headed to Kosorac and went left off the main road for about 3kms to a small settlement of 15 adults and 10 children, all Muslims living together as a community, while re-building their houses. They were living in tidy wooden accommodation huts provided by UNHCR, and are "looked after" by Ron and his G5 staff. They were very polite and friendly; they made us Bosnian coffee - ugh!. We provided all of them with a new pair of trainers.

Visit 2

Back to main road and straight across into Kosorac itself and to our main target of the day - the local school being used for a lot of Serb refugees. Before finding the school we asked the locals and they went off to find an English speaker for us. He came and told us he had worked in Bolton as a Joiner! He directed us to the school where we found a real sad set of people.

There was about 100 people, mainly adults all living together in this school building. The two storey building was in a poor state with graffiti and filthy. The people had only the clothes they were wearing, and they didn't keep the place clean!

Once we had opened the single truck - all others were at Customs or in workshop (Road Runner), the people were clamouring for stuff. We had to unload carefully and put the bulk food inside the school. The apparent leader/manager of the community was not good - and not liked I suspect. After a few minutes a different, big, over-fed man seemed to take charge and he was better as they listened to him. He was not short of any food!

We handed over a bunch of towels which started a fight between two men - that their new leader resolved. We had to threaten to leave if they didn't act sensibly.

We passed a lot of food, clothes and Rotary boxes over, and took photos of them for the Clubs back home. Although we left all the bulk stuff on the steps outside the school, we agreed amongst ourselves that most of the people would not see it as the fat guy would assert his authority and purloin the best stuff for himself as soon as we had gone.

One desperate lady, of about 55/60 years old, was tugging my trouser leg as I was on the tail-lift, asking for a coat as she was wearing a tatty men's jacket. I managed to find a super fur coat and gave it to her - she was overjoyed. She returned after a few minutes of strutting around in her new coat, and was pointing at her feet, which were holding a pair of very worn slippers. We looked around the truck but couldn't find any shoes, other than children's trainers! I was disappointed we couldn't help her.

After this I wandered around giving the children chocolate bars and pens. As I was giving the pens out, I was surrounded by the adults asking for pens. They were really excited at getting a pen each and were very grateful. Once we were back in the Dutch Land Rover, one woman put her hand through the window and I gave her a pen - but she pointed to her other hand, which already had a pen. She only wanted to shake hands in gratitude for our visit.

We also passed out 3 footballs (one of them a rugby ball) to the kids and they were delighted. Pity we didn't have more!!

We had to leave but we could have, and on reflection, should have done a bit more. Next time we won't be able to as the school is being closed shortly and these poor people will have to find somewhere else to live - according to Capt. Ron.

Visit 3

This Muslim settlement was on a hill overlooking a non-Muslim village - and apparently they used to get problems from the villagers. Paul and Lin had visited this site six months ago and were most impressed with the improvements since their last trip. Now no-one is living in tents or the two bed touring caravan left there from Britain - although were still erected and looking quite tatty.

Also there was a "Sweden Aid" 7 tonne lorry that had been left there, and the villagers were using it as a central store. Paul helped load supplies into it and he reported back that there was lots of fodder for the animals but very little food for the villagers themselves.

The people here were very happy and pleased to see us. Cpl Paul asked them where was the English speaking man, and then went to fetch him to help us. While we were waiting for the interpreter, the ladies insisted we see their new house that wasn't even started six months ago. (The authorities and the people themselves are building houses as a co-operative.). This large detached house had 12 beds in one downstairs room for the women and 8 in the other room for the men. Other villagers slept elsewhere in temporary or permanent accommodation.

Upstairs in the house they had made a simple chapel for their praying.

When the interpreter arrived he told us he had worked in England in London, Wakefield, Dewsbury and Leeds for three and a half years! He was about 40 years old and had returned to look after his mother and brother as his brother had been returned from a concentration camp and was seriously ill. We gave him a mattress as he asked for one because he didn't possess one. He was excellent in his broken English and his humour. He asked for the mattress as "he didn't have a woman to keep him warm' as he told us!

Along came a charming, shy 9 year old girl who quietly said "Thank You" in good English when I gave her some chocolate. So, I encouraged her to use her English and it was very good. Her name was Esma, and with my help she took language control to tell the community that lots of the stuff we gave them had to be shared - such as buckets, soaps, towels, etc. We made sure she got a nice new pair of trainers.

We gave all the men nice new jackets/fleeces and they were really proud.

Visit 4

This collection point was at the end of the open market road in Prijedor. There were about 30 people, kindly dominated by a jolly, plump mother of about 40. It was a community of Muslims, who were having new homes built for them by the authorities - we saw the one tradesman working on the one house. They also had a shared storage hut that we put lots of food and clothes into.

The leader's son, Erwin was thirteen years old and he spoke enough English to act as our interpreter, as we asked them what sort of things they would like. They did refuse stuff if they had enough already.

They were proudly pointing out the new houses being built, while they lived in large Swiss Army containers left there for them when the Swiss Army returned home.

End of a busy day and we went back to BLMF for a few beers and a nice indoors warm transit tent - shared this time with 40 soldiers of Prince of Wales Royal Regiment. They were not as noisy as our snorers - Maggie and/or Lin!

Tuesday 17th April 2001 - off we go to the final drop on the way home. Our starting mileage in BLMF was 369,425 kilometres.

We had a three hour journey into the mountains where we encountered lots of rain and then heavy snow as we got higher. We arrived in a pleasant purple painted hotel on the outskirts of Bosanski Petrovac where we met our Canadian 'guards' who had been arranged to meet us by the Canadian Capt Phil Meaney in BLMF.

We asked them to give us safe passage into the large refugee camp in the area. They were under orders NOT to take us into the camp as it was considered dangerous. Chas insisted we were going in, so they contacted their senior officer and reluctantly agreed to accompany us. This dithering delayed us another couple of hours.

There were two Canadian soldiers, a Captain and a Corporal allocated to us along with a young girl Albanian interpreter. Both these soldiers were armed and nervous as we went in, but there was no problems so they left after twenty minutes or so.

The 'buildings' on show are the tents that the people have been living in for 5 years or more. In the last year they have been provided with wooden huts that they now live in as shown in some of the other photos shown below.



Outside, looking East



Outside, looking West—from the same position as the first photo

Luckily they had a mild winter and this snow is not much, and normal for this time of year.

Each hut is home to about 50 people with a central corridor and 20 rooms. There are families in each hut, with each family typically being two young parents and anything between four and eight children. The one guy we spoke with said he had 14 children from two women.



The kids were all clamouring for their photo to be taken, so I took a few!!



Some of our gang helping to deliver items from the storage hut to the living huts

We unloaded about three lorry loads of goods into the camp, starting with about two tonnes of fresh food donated by the cooks at CLMF.- We didn't trust the Camp Manager - as he was well over fed, miserable and not lifting a finger to help us stock up. So we ensured each hut got their fair share by splitting the fresh food into thirteen piles - one for each hut and one for the community in town. We had a massive amount of fruit and vegetables, probably enough for a hut for a week!

After the allocation we got the men from each hut to take all the fresh food into their own huts, before we completely filled the storage hut (the kindergarten by weekday) with ASDA pasta, plastic plates, clothes, bedding, toys, nappies

In fact my opinion was that we gave them far too much and a lot will appear on the market tomorrow - still it will generate income for them. On the other hand they need income to pay for their cigarettes and beer they were smoking and drinking while we were there. I saw a 9 year old smoking - given to him by his dad! I even scolded the father for giving his son cigarettes.



Our Beverley Sisters (Colleen, Lin and Maggie) stacking up the pasta and brown sugar parcels— behind Maggie in the small boxes are make-up sets for the women



All looking up at Dad—and this was their home. A room about 10 foot square with beds on the floors around three walls, a wood burning stove for heat and cooking, a window, a door and a TV set

I spoke with many of the people, who spoke a little English. The father, who was encouraging is son to smoke, spoke enough English to explain his position. He invited us into his hut and asked us to take a photograph of his family.

As Dad told us he had been there over five years, since leaving Pristina in Kosovo. Many of the people here didn't have papers, but he did and proudly showed them to me. He wanted me to take these photographs and show them to everybody in Britain to highlight how they live.

It seems that most of the men speak two languages as they were all coming up to converse with them and asked if I could speak Deutsch or Italian. Their first language was Albanian, and their second was Croat or Italian or German or Both! One asked me if I could speak Swedish, while my guide (Dad with fags) offered to speak to me initially in French, German Italian or English. He certainly seemed to know enough in each language.

They were telling me that they had no future, no money, no jobs. The camp and the huts were now permanent with mains water and electricity. So they saw little hope for themselves at all.

They do get help from Save the Children and other charities like UNHCR and "Medecin sans frontiers" as shown in an earlier photo. Also the children are bussed into the town every day to go to school. So the authorities or charities are trying to improve their position. Some of the older boys were jokingly getting under our trucks and pretending to hang on so they could get to Britain, or at least to Germany. They certainly saw Germany as their promised land.

We were helped in the unloading by Emil and his friend, who we assume were local Council workers helping at the site, and Emil spoke enough English to help us. These two were a great help compared to the Manager and his wife.

During the unloading the bloated manager disappeared in his Mercedes and arrived back later with two dodgy looking guys in their twenties, who said they were from Save the Children. One spoke good English and introduced himself as Elvis. The way they were greedily looking at the goods we had unloaded seemed ominous to me, so we all agreed to make sure every hut got a good load of the dried foods and some clothes before we left.

We eventually left about 6pm after spending over 5 hours there. And there was still a lot of stuff left for the Manager to allocate out in our absence.

Long drive home across Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Belgium and France!

Super meal of 4kgs of lamb in Karlovac, Croatia followed by B & B in the same village. An excellent meal was very quickly rustled up at 10pm for just £8 a head including beer and wine. B & B in a lovely house at midnight where the five trucks parked all around the house blocking the road and neighbours.

Breakfast at 6 am and away by 7 am across Europe.

Next stop Austrian customs as we were searched and many fags were discovered and we realised that we could only bring one packet each from outside the EU as BLMF was NOT a British base to allow more for personal consumption - even though we had receipts from the NAAFI.

As we also agreed to take some packets home for our soldier friends from QDG, Paul Evans and me had to find over £900 in Austrian Schillings to pay the double duty for smuggling! We got it from the cash machine and Maggie's kitty. It also delayed us by four hours.

We now had to recover our fag money somehow, from the soldier when he returned to Cardiff at the end of April.

This is still ongoing.

Last night abroad and we stayed in a motel on German Services, getting the rooms after midnight and breakfast at 6 am again!