

Tina's Convoy Diary - Easter 2005

by Tina Williams

Friday 18 March 2005

Finally, after months of effort, the truck driven by Tina Williams & John Evans, collectively known as 'Two Taffs' was packed and ready for the off. In total, the convoy for this trip consisted of eight 7.5 tonne Trucks which are funded & filled by volunteers, two 38 tonne Articulated Lorries, provided and funded by Ford Motor Co and filled with corporate aid and one Ambulance, which was donated by Hampshire Ambulance Service.

There were several challenges to overcome on the journey including road traffic accidents at Maidstone, berthing problems at Calais, road tolls (which we spent hours arguing over but could not avoid paying) in Serbia before arriving at the Kosovo border only to have all of our vehicles sealed and locked in a pound over night while the red tape wrangling continued!

We were finally given our vehicles back and allowed to begin our work just after lunchtime on Wednesday 23rd and knew that we had a mammoth task ahead of us if we were to distribute all of the aid in the time left. As ever though, the band of volunteers that is Hope and Aid Direct, rose to the challenge with their usual gusto and good spirits....and we were off!!



Tina with her team mate John Evans

Distribution Day 1

We were joined in our truck by one of the guys who drove the 38 tonners over, a wonderful Scot named Alec. The day began with a visit to Qendra Collective Centre to help 9 families. When we arrived however, we discovered that there were actually 12 families living in what used to be a Police Station.

Its difficult to convey how desperate the conditions are; as we entered the building, the smell was overwhelming and the corridors are dark, dingy and dank. Each family, which could number up to 10 people live in a prison cell. They do everything in this confined space including cooking, eating and sleeping. In view of the cramped conditions and having seen the basic communal toilet and washing facility (cold water only), we were surprised how clean the families keep their rooms and it is to their credit that all of the children we saw were clean and well looked after.

We provided much needed food, toiletries, shoes, clothes and bedding to all the families at the Collective Centre.

We continued on to do a further 2 drops – firstly to Gurakoc where we provided aid to 10 refugee families and then on to Rakosh where we helped a further 32 families, all of whom were in very great need.



Sorted aid ready for distribution

Total Helped: 233 People across 53 Families

Distribution Day 2

Most people have a mental picture of the Kosovo as a war-ravaged land filled with partially bombed homes and we certainly see plenty of those views. Today however, all of the 7.5 tonne trucks drove for two hours from the capital, Pristina to the Gjilanec Region where we met with our guides from the Mother Theresa Organisation and split into individual groups. We in 'Two Taffs' were taken on a further 90 minute drive high up into the hills, through stunning scenery to reach our destination today. We were taking aid to Ashkahli refugees who live in a very remote village with no employment.

The families were delighted that we were able to give them food and clothes parcels and the children were especially excited by the wonderful new trainers that we were able to give them.



Someone needs new shoes



The joy of new shoes

Total Helped: 156 People across 43 Families

Distribution Day 3

We set off for the warehouse at 7.00am today as we have a three hour drive south to the Prizren Region and have a large number of families to help.

Today's challenge to overcome was that we did not have an English speaking guide to accompany us during the drops. We were escorted to our first drop by a guide who could speak English and he instructed one of the community leaders of our requirements before going on with another truck to their drop.



At Ferizaj - happy with a new doll

This first drop was to 25 families and we were lucky to find that some of the older children could speak English and could help us in explaining to the assembled families how to cook the special Mountaineers meals that formed part of the food parcels that we were giving out. There was a comical time where I was standing on the tail lift demonstrating 'air hostess style' how to open the pack, pour on boiling water and then re-seal the packs for the required time while a local boy aged around 14 years explained in the local language!

The track to our next drop was by far the worst 'road' that we have ever encountered. The word pothole doesn't do justice to the massive craters that we had to navigate the truck through and it went on for at least six miles until we arrived at a village where we were to help 61 families – all desperate for aid and impatient for it! The difficulty was in maintaining discipline amongst the recipients while we sorted out the aid to ensure each had a fair share. The problem was exasperated by not having an English speaker with us. Sadly, this drop was not as successful as others on the trip as a small fight broke out which quickly descended into chaos and we were forced to abandon the drop and lock ourselves into the truck before making our escape. We were disappointed by the events of this drop but must always remember that their actions are borne of desperation.

Total Helped: 529 People across 86 Families

Distribution Day 4



Today was the day that is set aside for the volunteers to work with any special projects and 'Two Taffs' have two such projects that are very dear to us:

Magura Village

We have been in contact with a local aid agency for some time with the intention of providing more long-lasting aid to this village. Here is an excerpt of an email from him:

(Left) Another child will get new shoes - and toys

"Hello Tina,

It is very nice hearing from your side besides that you are willing to assist our community in Magura village. For sure we really do appreciate your efforts for helping us in these life conditions and help is very welcome in this moment. Besides the kind of help which you are trying to help us there are also some other ways in order to assist us, i.e. computer donation in order to improve the knowledge of community towards IT because as you may know here the local economy development is very weak and unemployment is more 74% of population. So, you can imagine in this time if they apply for a job and they don't know using computers - it is very difficult for us in general. So, if we could old computers donations from your good willing villagers and your organization is more than welcome in this time because we can continue with providing with computer courses for the whole community"

Following this email, we managed to collect six computers from generous friends and supporters and were very pleased to deliver them to the Youth Association for Human Rights which has a small base in Magura. Our contact there, Bekim, was delighted with the computers and chairs that we delivered and assured us that they will be put to very good use providing IT lessons to the young people of the village. I was delighted to be presented with a 'Certificate of Excellence' and a framed photograph of Mother Teresa.



Branka and Bosnian lady (Tina centre)

Our second drop in Magura Village was to a Collective Centre at the far end of the village. The building itself is dilapidated with several of the rooms totally burned out and again, conditions inside were bleak in the extreme. We spent around 2 hours there and were able to give each of the 18 families that live there a good supply of food, toiletries, clothing and bedding. Although most of the distribution was done off the back of the truck, we did manage to visit one family to see the conditions that they live in. These parents and five children share one room which is about 12 foot square. The Mother is bed ridden and spends every hour lying on a wooden board with a foam strip and, despite her obvious ill health, she was delighted that we had taken the time to visit here. Apart from the food and clothing, we were able to provide her with a new mattress which will make her much more comfortable.

After Magura, we headed for the second of our special projects:

Ferizaj Collective Centre

As soon as the truck pulled into Ferizaj, the children all came racing to greet us with the adults not too far behind! There was much hugging and crying done by all. The Bosnian lady (who's name we still don't know) was so excited to see us, we were afraid she might be taken ill - and that was before we gave her the framed photographs that we'd brought for her!! We were very touched when she explained, through our interpreter, how glad she was to see us and how much she worries about us in the long spells between our visits. She worries about us?!!! To our further delight, Branka the 'lady with the leg' hobbled down to the truck. Longer term supporters will remember that Tina and David Sylvester met her two years ago and she was suffering with infected thrombosis which had been allowed to fester to the point where, if she did not receive immediate medical treatment, amputation would have been necessary. At the time, we did what we could and gave her the money to pay for the treatment. We're very pleased to report that on this trip her leg, although still badly swollen and discoloured has definitely improved in the 12 months since we saw her last.

We were all busy on the back of the truck, sorting the aid for this drop when we were given a stark reminder the level of suffering that prevails. A lady who we have met on the past two visits here came up to the truck and was obviously distressed. She wanted to tell us about her recent tragedy and again through our interpreter, the story unfolded: Two weeks before our visit, she had needed to go out in the evening to carry out a task. Wanting to make sure that her two youngest children aged four & half years and eighteen months were safe, she locked them into their home (wooden hut).

Sometime later, a heater fell over and her two children were burned to death in the room that she had locked them in. Words cannot explain the sorrow that was in that poor lady's face. We decided to give this lady all of the household items, bedding etc that we had on the truck and were heartened to find that her neighbours all agreed that we should.

...in this and many other instances on this convoy we have made a real difference to people's lives and we could not do it without the help and support of our many friends. Thank you, thank you, Thank you!



The bereaved mother

My special thanks to:

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