

Paddy Wagon' to Kosovo, with Hope and Aid Direct and back !

"I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, naked and you clothed me" Matthew 25
v35-36.

Hope and Aid Direct, an all-volunteer organisation, (Registered Charity No 1077146) motto "We take Aid NOT sides" has been taking aid to the Balkans for some years now.

The Hope and Aid convoys of Humanitarian Aid started going to the Balkans soon after the civil wars that ravaged the country and split the population, ruining lives, and dividing the population along ethnic fault lines. Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) poured from one region into another as the increasing violence polarised the population.

Hope and Aid Direct has been regularly, twice yearly Easter and early Autumn, travelling from the UK mainly in 38 and 7.5 tonne trucks taking Humanitarian Aid in the form of supplies and practical help to the refugees and IDPs.

This Autumn's convoy, the seventh to Kosovo since 2000, consisted of two 38 tonne articulated lorries, seven 7.5 tonne trucks and one Jumbo Transit. One of the 7.5 tonne trucks, 'Paddy Wagon' named after Jack Curran (Devizes) and yours truly (yes you've guessed it TWO Paddies) joined the convoy and both of us travelled to Kosovo for the first time.

My involvement started just before Christmas last year, at a seasonal gathering in Tim Gerry's house (The Pines, Faringdon), when I committed myself to joining the convoy to support Tim and Mike Barrett (Orchard Hill, Faringdon). Mike is a seasoned traveller/'convoyer' of 11 trips and co-ordinator for the Faringdon/Oxfordshire area. Tim had made his first trip last Easter. The plan was for the three of us to travel together in one 7.5 tonne truck but as time progressed we realised that we would have enough supplies/aid to fill two trucks and due to the kindness and financial assistance of many friends, local companies and trusts, we were able to hire two trucks.

Each team has to fund itself. We do not have a central fund! Approximate cost is around £2,500 per truck. We have no staff and are completely non-profit making – virtually all funds donated are used to get goods to their destination. (Our additional costs in 2001, 2002 and 2003 were less than 1.75%). Jack Curran, Mike's daughter's father-in-law, offered, early this summer, to accompany us/me on the trip and thus the 'Paddy Wagon' was 'born'.

As a result of the successful aid visits Hope and Aid Direct has gained a very high reputation in the area remaining loyal to refugees, mostly forgotten by the rest of the world, who continue to be in extremely difficult circumstances. Hope and Aid Direct visit the refugees from all backgrounds, Serbian, Albanian and Roma, giving the aid **personally** to them on their 'doorsteps'. Some of these refugees are amongst the poorest in the region, particularly the 'Roma' (Romany/Gypsies) who are living in appalling and very primitive conditions. Following the many contacts and friendships established over the years, "taking Aid NOT sides" Hope and Aid Direct has been granted permission to continue with this form of assistance.

I started a little early, accompanying Alec Christie in a Hope and Aid Direct 38 tonne artic, (picked up from Dagenham on Monday 20 September (both 38 tonne trucks were kindly loaned to Hope and Aid Direct by Ford UK and included the use of a fuel card for the whole journey) around the highways and byways 'Up North' and 'downtown' Leicester and Chadwell Heath collecting many pallets of donated aid from medium to large sized companies. We also cross loaded the contents of a 7.5 tonne truck, of more donated aid, from Cardiff. On my return to Faringdon I collected our 7.5 tonne truck ('Paddy Wagon'), from M4 Self Drive, Swindon, on Thursday 23rd and soon made my way to Jack's home in Easterton near Devizes (after acquiring a pallet of paint and a variety of paint brushes, rollers etc kindly donated by Holman Specialist Paints Ltd of Swindon) to load the aid that he had assembled.

This amounted to some 2.5 tonnes of Aid, donated by friends, neighbours, school children and other kind folk in the area and consisted of everything from food, mainly pasta, to 15 wheelchairs (many personally repaired/serviced by Jack) clothing of all sorts, blankets, garden implements, sewing machines etc, etc. We then made our way to Faringdon to load the aid that I had been kindly given, again by many friends, neighbours, strangers, a local charity shop and local church groups bringing our total to around five tonnes.

The trip proper started on Friday morning, 24th, as Jack and I joined Mike and Tim's 7.5 tonner, equally laden with donated aid, including around 100 'Rotary' boxes and over a 130 boxes of food collected with the aid of Rotary in Faringdon and Wantage from organised 'shop and drops', two in Faringdon (Budgens and Costcutter) and the other in Wantage (Waitrose – which ran out of pasta on the day !). We then headed for Maidstone to join up with the rest of the convoy, (and to have our CB radios fitted, donated free, by a group of local CB Radio enthusiasts). The two 38 tonners had departed late on Wednesday 22nd and we were destined to meet up with them on the Hungarian/Serbian Border the following Tuesday.

So duly 'Baker, Bakered' the convoy, consisting of the aforementioned seven trucks and Jumbo Transit, each with its own 'nom de plume' on the front, sides and rear of each vehicle namely; 'Robin Hood', 'Busby', 'Little John', 'Alleycat', 'Deejay'. 'Flour Power', 'Sea Dog' and of course 'Paddy Wagon', set off on our momentous journey. These 'names/call signs' were used on the CBs to advise of routes etc, also to identify each other and ascertain who is doing what. The chat/banter, humour and 'wind ups' over the whole route enabled us to keep our spirits high.

Totalling 17 people, ranging from retired Bankers, Baker, former Army and Navy personnel, former Concorde Pilot, HGV driver, Motor Mechanics, NHS staff, Nurses, Radio DJ, TV Technician, recent Graduate, retired air stewardess, retired Weather Man, etc, etc, all with one common aim, to get aid to where it is most needed. As mentioned above we joined the two 38 tonners, 'Big Mother' and 'Late Entry' en route with a further four drivers. We were later joined in Kosovo by three more 'airborne' volunteers who had flown out from the

Total local involvement from FARINGDON, consisted of, Mike Barrett, Tim Gerry, ('Little John') Alec Christie of Park Road, Alec actually 'came on board' just three weeks prior to departure (38 tonne HGV driver, in 'Late Entry') and yours truly, (with, as mentioned above, Jack Curran from near Devizes,) in 'Paddy Wagon'. Alec was joined in the 38 tonner by his friend Keith Rudman, from Cricklade, who agreed to travel as late as the Saturday prior to departure!

The convoy was most ably, efficiently and, as required at times, rather strictly! led by Charles Storer, co-founder of Hope and Aid Direct.

We witnessed some brilliant and outstanding contrasts en route and during our time in Kosovo. From stunning mountain scenery, magnificent colour changes through the many forests and vineyards of Europe, the sweeping majestic Maas, Rhine and Danube rivers to trickling brooks, and spectacular waterfalls, in the hills surrounding Pristina.

Entry to Kosovo was considerably facilitated by the Serbian Embassy in London, through whose efforts, (not to forget those of Mr Mike Kelly, co-founder with Charles, of Hope and Aid Direct) we were given full 'blue light' police security escort for the 487 Kilometres (292 Miles) across the entire length of Serbia.....and back again! Travel each way through nine countries, (seven in EEC); involving six Customs and six Police check points, in excess of a dozen passport checks, re-production of all convoy documentation by two separate Spedition companies, and 000's Euros in 'fees'. The longest 'wait' for passport and documentation checks was around five hours, at the Serbian border with Hungary, at a little 'outpost' called Kelebia. Five hours seemed reasonable as 'hold ups' here can vary from 24 to 72 hours!! We were greatly assisted here by Pastor Marijan, an old friend of Hope and Aid Direct, who had travelled 150 Km from nearby Croatia to help/facilitate our entry.

On arrival in Kosovo we made our way to the capital, Pristina, where a very large warehouse had been set aside for our use. Each of the ten vehicles were unloaded and items stored in the warehouse in separate and various categories of aid and our special 'wish list' corner. We then, and on a daily basis, reloaded each of the 7.5 tonners and the Jumbo Transit with specific aid (food, bedding, clothing, shoes, toiletries in the main and an assortment of other items (with toys for those with children). Each vehicle was loaded with roughly sufficient aid for about 50 families. Hope and Aid Direct go to the aid recipient that will have been previously identified as being in the greatest need by a local charity working with us. Hope and Aid Direct's lead partners in Kosovo are, **United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)** who organised and co-ordinated the distribution programme. Other partners/NGOs also came on board as a result of UMCOR's excellent, and much respected, co-ordination.

So a 'typical' day during our time there consisted of the seven 7.5 tonne trucks and the Jumbo Transit setting off early in the morning to various 'drop off' points either in small towns/municipalities or villages. We were always accompanied by representatives of UMCOR (or UNHCR or ICMC, or other NGOs) acting as guides and interpreters. We were occasionally, for security reasons, also accompanied by the Kosovo Police and/or UN KFOR troops (currently Swedish, American and Irish).

These 'drop off' points could be at a collective centre or at transit camps/centres or, very rarely, the aid recipient's 'home'. Some of the drops were in very remote areas up dirt tracks which were only barely accessible to 4x4 vehicles and 7.5 tonners. Some of the collective centres, (usually 'housed'/established in old, derelict, and war scarred, warehouses, damaged, school buildings etc) consisted of anywhere between 25 and 60 families of mixed ethnic backgrounds, all living in the typical cramped conditions of one room per family (regardless of the number of people in the family !) and sharing very basic/primitive sanitation facilities.

One of the centres I visited in a small town/village called Klina, near Pec (Peja), was in an old, derelict, two storey hospital housing 48 families with just one toilet per storey! Such distributions are very hard (and really heartbreaking). It is important to ensure that everyone receives the same amount. So piles of 'goods' were made for each family in the best available area. In Klina, one of the long, old hospital, corridors was used to lay out the many piles and then one person from each family collected their allocation. Those with babies and very young children (from UMCOR's carefully prepared list) had additional foodstuffs.

On completion of each days' drops we returned to the warehouse and refilled the vehicles for the next day and so on each day until the warehouse was empty and ALL of our aid was distributed.

Total distance of circa 5,400 KM (3,375 miles) travelled with a further 500-700 Km clocked up delivering the aid in Kosovo itself.

All in all a wonderful experience with a mixture of emotional highs and lows, accompanied by an incredible sustained adrenaline rush (could have been all the Red Bulls!), amazement, enlightenment, empathy, pity, friendships, and last but not least the gratitude expressed by ALL in Kosovo. One could not fail to be moved by the plight of so many and the daily struggle that is commonplace.

Total fatigue. A perfect three weeks !

THE STATS

Autumn 2004 Convoy to Kosovo

- ✦ Hope & Aid Direct convoy consisted of seven 7.5 ton trucks, one Jumbo Transit, and two 38 ton articulated lorries;
- ✦ Total approx 60 tons of humanitarian aid;
- ✦ The equivalent of approx 200 pallet spaces of goods;
- ✦ Aid distributed 'directly' to 1,451 families, numbering approx 6,635 people (Source: United Methodist Committee On Relief distribution statistics);
- ✦ Distributions took place in 19 Municipalities comprising circa 112 villages, including Transit Centres, and Collective Centres;
- ✦ Distributions also to North Mitrovica Hospital, Plementina Camp, Lipyan Prison, various schools, kindergartens, 'Hope & Homes' Orphanage, Vustri Police School, Skenderaj Municipality, Shtimlje Mental Institution, 50 of the families with missing members, SOS Kinderdorf, the medical centre in Babin Most, and to Balkan Sunflowers;
- ✦ Each family received a 'banana box' sized box of mixed food and toiletries, plus shoes, clothes, bedding, and an assortment of other items.

Projects progressed included

- ✦ Nutritional diet research - questionnaire to be distributed to 2,000 children at two schools, to gather two weeks of food data - information to be fed into a nutrition programme, with a view to producing easily distributed nutritional diet/cooking information and menu ideas.
- ✦ Bakery project - identified potential partner organisation (Red Cross of Kosovo) to provide resources and ingredients - investigation underway to convert/provide oven to produce 3000 loaves a day for distribution free to EVIs
- ⊖ Telephone Doctors' - Discussions held to describe 'telephone doctors' service, and further details to be investigated.
- ✦ Magura Mining Village Twinning Links - Contact made with village representatives, and further discussions now being taken forward with a village in Wales
- ✦ Austrian Go-Box refunds being applied for by OSCE Kosovo.
- ✦ Convoy UK team numbered 24 people, (including three airborne)
- ✦ Kosovo sponsor and support co-ordinator UMCOR provided 11 local personnel.
- ✦ Other Kosovo personnel involved, numbered over 50 people.
- ✦ Six other Kosovo NGOs plus UNHCR provided logistical support and Refugee/IDP/EVI lists; these were ICMC (International Catholic Migration Committee), ARC, GOAL, KAN, MOTHER TERESA SOCIETY & BALKAN SUNFLOWERS. We were also assisted by the local Red Cross.
- ✦ Entry to Kosovo was considerably facilitated by the Serbian Embassy in London, through whose efforts, (not to forget Mr Kelly) we were given full 'blue light' police security escort for the 487 Kilometres (292 Miles) across the entire length of Serbia.....and back again!
- ✦ Travel each way through nine countries, (seven in EEC) , involving six Customs and six Police check points, in excess of a dozen passport checks, re-production of all convoy documentation by two separate Spedition companies, and thousands Euros in 'fees'.
- ✦ Distance of circa 3,375 miles travelled.

Goods taken included

- ✦ Twenty-six pallets of medical breathing apparatus, one Pallet of Toffee spread, two Pallets Flour, ten Pallets new clothing from Boden, four Pallets of new clothing from Abbey Road music studios, six Pallets toiletries, including 40,000 shampoo and conditioner sachets, from In Kind Direct, one pallet Wonderbras, one pallet surgical gloves, one pallet Men's underwear, one pallet ladies pyjamas tops, one pallet Tigger toys, three pallets of paint, one pallet pasta/rice, 500 banana boxes of dried food and toiletries, 120 school desks, 425 school chairs, 100 quilts, 600 Ring Binders, playground equipment, 25 bicycles, two Pallets of school equipment and stationary items, about 15 wheelchairs, 20 sewing machines, five knitting machines, tens of pairs of shoes, tens of brightly knitted blankets and garments, hundreds of bright yellow buckets, 10 battery operated bath chairs, dozens of musical instruments including an electronic drum kit, dozens of new football kits balls and pumps, about a dozen children's cricket sets, football goal posts and nets, 30 sacks of nappies, huge quantities of new toys, 25 computers plus two laptops, an office photocopier, filming equipment, quantities of medical equipment including ophthalmoscopes, laryngoscopes, (if you know what they are!) hundreds of spare tyres for wheelchairs, boxes of household pots and pans, and the usual large quantity of clothes in sacks (PLEASE FOR THE FUTURE TRY AND PACK IN BANANA BOXES OR CLEAR BAGS)

Paperwork included

- ✦ Invitations (x3) from the Embassy of Serbia & Montenegro (In English, Serbian, and Albanian)
- ✦ Invitations (x3) from UMCOR (In English, Serbian, and Albanian)
- ✦ Invitations (x3) from UNHCR (In English, Serbian, and Albanian)
- ✦ Export document (x10)
- ✦ Combined Manifest & Gift Certificate (x10) (In English and Serbo-Croat)
- ✦ Combined Clothing Hygiene & Food Health Certificate (x10)
- ✦ Quality Control Certificate (x10)
- ⊕ Not to mention ferry tickets, insurance documents, driver lists, Vignettes and the mountain of Spedition papers!

Incidents included

- ✦ Kamikaze cross-eyed German driving a company car with a small scratch claiming (but not getting) €1,000 to cover repairs, truck with broken clutch slave cylinder - which was replaced against all odds in five hours - driven by man with a condition known as 'duck tape foot', a slow puncture replaced with a spare wheel being shared between at least five trucks, a tail-lift that wouldn't....., a hot rod truck with blow through exhaust repaired by man who misappropriated welding equipment, and all this completed by a demented bunch of cross-dressers and dead-beats with a penchant for exchanging their underwear - all very worrying
- ✦ Value of goods for Customs (as all donated) €200 per truck
- ✦ Value of goods (retail) averaged circa £4 million
- ✦ Brings total Hope & Aid Direct total distribution to date to: 93 x 7.5 ton, one cattle Truck, two Transit, 13 x 38 ton, 1 x 17.5 ton, and one Ambulance
- ✦ Plus individual convoys to Belarus, a container to Zambia, and Aqua boxes to Iran
- ✦ Total of 624 tonnes of aid
- ✦ Estimated retail value in excess of £37.5 million
- ✦ 10,051 Recipient Families, comprising circa 45,235 people
- ✦ Approx cost of distribution since 1999 - circa £192,000