

Memories of Kosovo

A helicopter pilot recalls his peacekeeping tour of duty over one of the world's most strife-torn regions.

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Norwegian troops (in rearmost rank) took over sponsorship of the First Kosovar Scouts, local school-age kids, when the Canadians returned home. (Jonathan Knaul)

As I awaken to my alarm clock, I can see my breath in the dark, stale air. Our generator must have died during the night. It is 5:30 a.m. in the middle of January in the Yugoslavian province of Kosovo, and according to my thermometer it is eight degrees Centigrade (46 Fahrenheit) inside our six-man shelter. I have to get moving; I have three missions today, and the first briefing commences at 7:00 a.m.

Walking outside at 6:30 to load my survival gear into the aircraft, I find the flight engineer, Master Corporal Alain Bilodeau, brushing the snow off our aircraft, one of eight Canadian Forces CH-146 Griffon helicopters supporting the NATO peacekeeping mission here. A 1990s version of the Vietnam-era UH-1 Huey, the Bell Helicopter Textron Canada model 412CF Griffon is a tactical utility helicopter, with twin engines driving a four-blade main rotor.

Outside it is below freezing, and over a foot of snow has fallen overnight. By 7:00 a.m., the aircraft commander, Captain Stéphane Roux, and I have checked the weather, had our intelligence briefing, and planned the mission. We all look tired—no one slept well last night with the heat off. At 7:30 a.m. we start the engines, and it will take almost 20 minutes to warm up all the systems. As aircraft commander, Stéphane is the decision-maker who has primary responsibility for both the aircraft and the mission. We'll usually share stick time, but as first pilot, I will be the one doing most of the flying, and I had better be on the ball today: We'll be operating in a known threat zone, and there is no room for complacency.

At 8:15 a.m. we land at the Finnish battalion camp near Lipjan, some 10 miles south of Pristina, and pick up four special reconnaissance soldiers. Our first mission is to provide an eye in the sky and top cover for a series of house raids being conducted by Finnish troops with dogs and armored vehicles. The soldiers in the back of our aircraft, equipped with radios in addition to their personal weapons (nobody goes anywhere in Kosovo without a weapon), will monitor the scene from above and coordinate the effort.

The Finns have intelligence reports that several houses in a particular Albanian village are harboring arms and drugs. An hour into the raids, there has been some resistance and several arrests have been made. By 10 a.m. we are back at the Canadian camp, refueling our aircraft "hot"—with the engines running and the crew strapped in and ready to go. Within 30 minutes we are airborne again and back over the scene of the raids.

After another hour and a half the raids are completed. Several assault rifles and some illegal drugs are seized, and a few people are taken into custody. In the backyard of one Albanian house, the Finns find several graves. We can only speculate about the bodies; the conclusions will be left to the United Nations investigators, who will arrive later. There are many graves in Kosovo.

Less than three miles northwest of the town of Pristina, on a ridge overlooking the town and a broad plain that sweeps beyond it, stands a simple brown monument about 100 feet tall. It dominates the landscape, and although it offers a natural visual checkpoint, we avoid flying near it because of what it symbolizes. The monolith commemorates an epic battle fought on June 28, 1389, when a Turkish army under Sultan Murad I delivered a crushing defeat to Serbian forces led by Prince Lazar, then left the bodies to be picked at by carrion birds. Historical records suggest that as many as 70,000 people died during this daylong battle. Serbs call this place the Field of Blackbirds, and it is said that the soul of the Serbian nation resides here.

In the spring of 1987, Slobodan Milosevic, then the Serbian Communist party leader, came to Kosovo and, before an attentive crowd made up mostly of Serbs resentful over treatment by local Albanians, stated, "Nobody, either now or in the future, has the right to beat you." With those words, Milosevic aroused Serbian nationalism and hatred for the other ethnic groups in the crumbling nation states of Yugoslavia, thereby consolidating his hold on power. By the early 1990s, widespread ethnic warfare had devastated this Balkan region.

To the west of the monument, at Obilic, lies a coal-burning electrical plant, and when the winds are from the north, we can see the brown swath in the snow extending for miles beneath the acrid plume that emanates from the plant's smokestacks. Just south of Obilic lies the town of Kosovo Polje (polje is Serbian for "field"), which is a suburb of Pristina. For me, Kosovo Polje is a microcosm of Kosovo the province. It is one of the few remaining settlements in which Serbs, Albanians, and Gypsies still live together. But "living together" is not really

accurate: In the months that I have been here, scarcely a day has passed that a house has not been set on fire.

Last year, in the spring of 1999, I volunteered to join a Canadian Forces contingent that would help keep the peace in Kosovo. I was just one of about 48,000 troops from more than 30 nations involved in the Kosovo Force, or KFOR, the United Nations-mandated, NATO-led peacekeeping mission that began on June 12, 1999, after the bombing campaign against Serb paramilitary forces ended. In March 1999 I told my mother that I would be sent on military duties in the Balkans. It was the kind of thing no mother wants to hear, especially not my mother, who had spent her teen years in London during the German bombing.

On December 18, 1999, I arrived in the Canadian camp at Donja Koretica, or DK, just a 30-minute drive west of Pristina, along with my squadron, 430 Escadron Tactique d'Hélicoptère, from Quebec City, Quebec. Our unit here carries the name KRWAU, for Kosovo Rotary Wing Aviation Unit. But the acronym KRWAU is pronounced "crow," a coincidental reminder of the ever-present blackbirds that infest our hangar. We are crows among the blackbirds.

The Griffon I will fly can carry up to 15 people and has a maximum gross weight of 11,900 pounds. It has armor in both the floor and the crew seats, a 7.62-mm automatic rifle mounted on the cargo door, and missile warning systems. It can handle instrument flight in non-icing conditions, and the avionics package includes all the traditional navigation aids, supplemented by GPS satellite navigation for position data and Doppler radar systems that measure velocity over the ground. With all of the extra equipment we carry, the empty weight of the helicopter is relatively high—often in the neighborhood of 9,000 pounds. Fuel for 90 minutes of flight plus a reserve adds 1,400 pounds. That leaves room for a payload of 1,500 pounds, which means that we can typically carry a maximum of five passengers.

Shutting down the helicopter at camp DK at noon, I can feel the cramps in my legs as I clamber out of the cockpit. Armored seats are made for protection, not for comfort. The crew and I have been strapped in for more than four hours, and we are eager to stretch and eat some lunch. There is not much time as we still have two more missions to fly before our day is over.

Shortly before 1:30 p.m. we land on the Kosovo side of Gate 3, one of the main border crossings into Serbia, guarded by both British and Canadian soldiers. Here we pick up a British lieutenant, two soldiers, and an Albanian interpreter. For the next hour we patrol along the border with Serbia looking for any signs of the Serbian special police. NATO established a buffer zone about three miles wide on the Serbian side of the border within which only Serbian border police are allowed. Any other Serbian armed forces are prohibited from entering.

The terrain here is deceiving: very mountainous and serene. To the untrained eye it appears tranquil, with barren, high, windswept hilltops, few inhabitants, and not much activity. But we are not the only ones patrolling here; we can hear Czech ground reconnaissance teams on the radio. Day or night, no matter what the weather, the Czechs are on watch, though they are so well concealed you will never see them. I must remind myself that to the Serbs, KFOR is

an invading and occupying force in a province that legally belongs to Yugoslavia. Most Albanians welcome NATO, but for those people who still constitutionally own Kosovo, Canadians and NATO are anything but welcome here.

Our patrol takes 45 minutes and proceeds without incident. We are to drop off our passengers at an Albanian house located on a mountaintop. Small isolated dwellings like these can be seen all along the border. This particular house is situated in a bleak location several miles from civilization. The British lieutenant tells us that a couple, both in their 70s, live here. They have no automobile or tractor, no means of resupplying themselves. The British officer visits frequently with medicine and food.

With the winds gusting, we land near the house. The elderly couple approaches, hunched over and walking with long canes. They are both dressed in light clothing, and their only guardian is an emaciated German shepherd. We leave the British troops and interpreter there. They tell us they will make their own way back—on foot, we suppose. As our helicopter lifts off, a large cloud of snow envelops the people on the ground, and they wrap their arms about their heads and turn their backs toward us. It is hard to imagine how these two old people have survived up here for this long.

At 2:45 p.m. the crew and I arrive back at the Canadian camp for another hot refuel. By 3:30 p.m. we are orbiting over a Serbian funeral that will last an hour and a half. Our job is to discourage any violence from erupting during the ceremony. Two days earlier, an Albanian youth gunned down a Kosovar Serbian father of four walking home in the late afternoon. The murder was allegedly carried out as one of many acts of reprisal. Hate comes from all sides.

The rotor blades make a loud slapping noise as I bank the helicopter sharply into the wind and my thoughts veer with it. I focus on the grief that the family below must feel. Added to their pain, they must endure the intrusion of a noisy helicopter as the life of a father and husband is honored and they bid him farewell.

Our flying day finishes shortly after 5 p.m. Canadian Forces flying rules state that aircrews are allowed a maximum eight hours of flying in one day—exactly what we have flown. We must have had at least two false missile-warning alarms every hour. As I lumber out of the cockpit, I feel five pounds lighter than I did when I started my day. Stéphane and Alain also emerge slowly and with much effort, the fatigue visible as they stretch their backs. Many of my muscles are tight, and I am thinking only of a hot meal and bed. Luckily, we are changing to night flying the following day, and can sleep in the next morning. We don't know it now, but we will need the extra sleep for tomorrow night's mission.

It is snowing again, but at least the generator keeps working and there is ample heat in my shelter. After a good seven hours of rest, I am up and busying myself with plans for the upcoming weekly meeting of the First Kosovar Scouts. Several of us Canadian servicemen and -women act as scout leaders for a group of 21 Kosovar Albanian boys and girls, who range in age from 10 to 17. Once a week for two hours, the group meets in the Canadian camp, where

we teach the kids everything from orienteering and building a camp fire to dental hygiene and landmine awareness.

Working with the scouts is the easiest part of my job in Kosovo. The kids are always happy, upbeat, full of vigor, and ready to tackle any challenge—not what you would expect from a group of kids who have just been through war and organized persecution. Many of their fathers or brothers are either dead or unaccounted for.

Most of the children have badly decayed teeth. The dentists in Kosovo usually leave rotting teeth in rather than pull them. They reason that it is better to have a rotten tooth than no tooth at all. I take Sheremet, a boy of 14, to see our Canadian Forces dentist one day. There is no choice but to pull one molar that has been causing him a lot of pain. Afterward, I drive Sheremet home in one of our military vehicles. It's a 30-minute drive down a road full of very large potholes—scars of war.

On the way we pass a mass grave just outside Poklek, Sheremet's village. It is the first time that I have seen a mass grave up close. I have seen many from the air, but it is very different when you can reach out and touch the graves. This particular grave is located on a back road behind Poklek in a remote location where no one would ever hear the shots. There are dozens of bodies at the site, all exhumed and examined by UN war crimes investigators. After the investigation was complete, the bodies were laid to rest in separate burial plots. This was the 11th mass grave that I'd seen in four months.

When I arrive at Sheremet's home, his family immediately invites me and my driver, Corporal Carlo Senegal, into their home. A single 30-foot-square room, which Sheremet and seven members of his family must share, serves all of them as bedroom, guest room, and kitchen.

While we sit and speak to his father in French, Sheremet's older sister quietly pours coffee from a golden metal decanter into small cups that hold no more than a couple of ounces. But then, with this coffee, two ounces is more than enough. It is closer in texture to maple syrup than to what we know as coffee in North America. The coffee is very sweet, the taste is pleasant, and it warms me.

The room is cool and damp, and Sheremet's father offers to light the woodstove. I decline, having noticed that there was no wood stored outside the house. After half an hour, Carlo and I prepare to leave. Sheremet's father invites us to stay for supper, but they have little food, and we politely decline the offer. I also have a night mission that takes off in less than three hours.

Shortly after 7:30 p.m., Stéphane, Alain, and I are flying toward a map grid reference—the only information we have—where we are to pick up four members of a Swedish reconnaissance section. From the map, we can see that the landing zone lies in a narrow valley close to the border with Serbia. To add to the difficulty of the mission, it is a cloudy, snowy night with limited visibility in a region that is very mountainous. In these conditions, the performance of our night-vision goggles, which amplify ambient light, is significantly diminished. Canadian

Forces rules allow us to fly when the visibility is as low as one nautical mile (a bit more than a statute mile) if we can remain 200 feet above the highest obstacle. Flying at the edge of our weather limits with a fuzzy picture through the goggles is very uncomfortable, like driving down the highway in a downpour. To get to the pickup zone, we have to wind through valleys to avoid the overcast, which is pierced only by mountaintops. It is important that we complete this mission. It is another sub-zero night, and the Swedish patrol will have to spend it outdoors in a high-threat area if we don't pick them up.

Arriving in the vicinity of the grid reference, we see two flashes through the murk from a handheld light, indicating the exact location for pickup. There are no other lights available to wave us in; we are close to the border and the helicopter must remain blacked out, as must the people below. We circle once to get a good look at the landing zone. I can see that the LZ is in a tight spot. In the narrow valley, and with the strong winds prevailing from the north, there is only one option for the approach—from the south. We will have to fly over some electrical lines, and there are also lines on the left of the LZ and trees on the right. There will be no room for error, as there is just enough space in the LZ to fit one helicopter. I confirm the location with Stéphane and Alain and give an abbreviated briefing on how I will fly the approach. Stéphane gives me some tips; he has much more experience than I do.

Stéphane keeps his hands close to the controls as I make the approach. If I lose battery power to my goggles, I will be blind and he'll have to take over. A hundred feet high and 300 feet away from the landing zone, the approach looks good, but I start to feel the embrace of the valley around me. Alain has the back door on my side open and his head is outside the aircraft. I can hear his voice shiver as he reports our proximity to obstacles. A soldier in a clearing is signaling to us with his hands, but I am barely able to make him out. Stéphane continues to coach me through the approach. Thirty feet high and 30 feet away from the LZ, the downwash from the rotors engulfs us in a thick, blinding snow cloud. Alain is still able to see the ground, but I lose all outside visual references. I immediately inform Stéphane, who still has the ground in sight on his side of the helicopter. Stéphane takes over and plants us firmly in the near-knee-high snow.

The four Swedish soldiers jump aboard our aircraft, each carrying a backpack weighing about 80 pounds. With the snow and added weight, the takeoff will be even trickier than the landing. We are tight on fuel, close to the Serbian border, and we cannot linger on the ground. Alain calls "Ready" and I commence the takeoff. Feeling the urgency to depart, I yank the helicopter off the ground. Instantly our aircraft is smothered in snow and all three of us lose sight of the ground. There is only one option, so our eyes immediately go to the instruments to keep the helicopter level and climbing—a tough transition to make rapidly when you have been looking outside for the past hour. The troops in the back are oblivious to all this; they're just happy to be in a warm place. My fingers tense as I imagine the wires to the left of me and the trees to the right, which I can no longer see. Alain is unable to keep his head outside the aircraft because of the intense blowing snow. The seconds feel like hours, and a sense of

frustration washes over me. I want to see outside and be reassured that we're clear of the obstacles. Finally we break out of the snow cloud and find our aircraft in a safe climb out of the valley.

We still have to weave through more valleys to clear the clouds on our way home. Mindful that valleys are ideal places to hit electrical wires, my eyes strain to detect surprises. We are also low on fuel, and the doors start to close around us. Back in Canada this would not be as big a problem—we are in a helicopter and can land in any open field. But this is Kosovo, where there are reported to be more than 20,000 buried mines in the British-Canadian area of responsibility alone. Stéphane knows how to work the fuel-remaining numbers, and minutes later we break out of the mountains and into the lights of Pristina. We drop off our passengers at the Swedish camp on the outskirts of the capital. The weather is much improved between here and the Canadian camp, and we have enough fuel to make it back with a safe reserve.

Back at the Canadian camp we hover-taxi to our parking spot and shut down. Three technicians drive up, bundled in so many layers of clothing that they look like astronauts on a spacewalk. I watch them hook up a tow bar and jack the skids up on trolleys, their reddened and numb fingers desperately trying to work on the stubborn metal parts in the cold. The ground crew are wizards, and I owe them a lot. During a six-month period, they kept at least six of our eight aircraft serviceable every day.

In the distance, I can see Corporal Bill Street walking the helicopter line. Street is a military policeman with a wife and young child back in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He's part of the Canadian Airfield Security Force, and his job for an entire six-month tour is to pull 12-hour shifts guarding our helicopters and the airfield.

I will fly more missions tomorrow, and Bill Street will be out here again all night, shivering and protecting my helicopter. My mother will be warm in her Toronto apartment, worried sick. But I get my comfort throughout this time in Kosovo from the pride I feel in being a peacekeeper and a Canadian.