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United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

SMNRC Class 35 Phase II

Unclassified

Personal Experience Paper (PEP)

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Weapon Harvest

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the events and lessons learned during my deployment to Bosnia/Herzegovina in support of Operation Joint Forge (SFOR-11) from December of 2001 to October of 2002. It underscores the notion that building rapport with the local populace to achieve results that can only occur with the host nation's cooperation is essential in the Peacekeeping/Security Force environment. By establishing relationships with the locals, Team Bravo as well as the abstina of Kalisia saw great success in their efforts of collecting and disposing of deadly contraband.

## Weapon Harvest

I cannot honestly consider military service to be “customary” in my family. Despite my father serving in the Navy during the Vietnam War on the air craft carrier *USS Forrestal*, as well as my uncle serving as a helicopter pilot during Vietnam, as a child the thought of joining the military never crossed my mind. I had no opinions of the military; good or bad. By the time I graduated from high school I decided to enroll in the local community college to study small business management. After my first year I found myself dissatisfied with my classes and decided to move to a larger city and enrolled in a university. After one semester, I determined that school was not something I wanted to pursue at that point in my life. Taking a closer look at myself and considering my personality, I began contemplating joining the military. One week before my twenty-first birthday on 29 November 1989, I made a decision that would drastically change the course of my life; a decision I have never regretted.

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 is a day that no American will soon forget, particularly those who were serving in the Armed Forces. Talk of mobilizations and deployments were the main topic of conversation among many Soldiers. The level of patriotism among us had only grown stronger since that fateful day and soon after, our Battalion Commander held a formation for all Soldiers. He explained that as a result of 9/11, the 116<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade had received a mission to provide two tank platoons to support Operation Joint Forge; a Security Force mission in Bosnia/Herzegovina in the former Yugoslavian Republic. These two platoons would be formed out of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 116<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade on a volunteer basis and would be attached to another unit to support Stabilization Force (SFOR)-11. Immediately and without hesitation, I signed my name on the volunteer list and was chosen from hundreds of Soldiers to be one of the two Platoon Sergeants.

Up to this point, the battalion had been conducting heavy armor, force-on-force training of the Cold War era. It was not until Idaho received the SFOR mission that this changed for me and the other volunteers. The training quickly transitioned into Stabilization and Support Operations (SASO) as the operational tempo increased. Specifically, my platoon trained and qualified on its normal gunnery tank tables but in addition took on crowd control, mounted and dismounted patrolling operations training, Unexploded Ordinance training, and even Media Awareness training. The majority of time spent was preparing for a new role; Peacekeepers.

After three months of home station training, my platoon leader and I linked up with the company that we would be attached to for the SFOR mission; Bravo Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 163d Infantry from the Montana Army National Guard. Bravo Company's leadership welcomed us into their organization and was excited to have us as part of their team. Captain Thomas Luhrsen, the Company Commander, and First Sergeant James Irvin oriented us to the unit and began familiarizing us with their Standing Operating Procedures. This was the beginning of a relationship between tankers and infantrymen that would grow over the next several weeks as we prepared for a Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation at Ft. Polk, Louisiana.

Upon arriving at Ft. Polk, the rest of my platoon was able to meet our new unit as well as 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which was the Active Component (AC) higher headquarters that Team Bravo would fall under. Because the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment already had a Bravo Company, we were quickly renamed Team Bravo to limit any potential confusion.

At first there was a more-than healthy sense of competition between the different Military Occupational Skills (MOS), however, as we began to train in SASO operations, the Soldiers quickly realized that MOSs were immaterial and that we all needed to learn to rely on one

another regardless of occupation if we wanted to be successful in our mission. With hard work from the leadership, soon the cohesion and team work between Soldiers utilizing M1A1 tanks and M3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles started to click. They found themselves supporting each other in ways they had never thought of before. This became even more evident as we began transitioning into dismounted and mounted patrolling in HMMWV's. Within my own platoon, the Soldiers gained a whole new respect for the infantryman and what they could learn from their expertise since they were no longer encased in their armored chariots. The lessons learned from each other during a challenging JRTC rotation would serve us well as we moved into the next phase of our mission; deploying to Bosnia.

Eagle Base was located in the municipality of Tuzla, Bosnia/Herzegovina. The base occupied the Tuzla Main International Airport and had been converted into a tactical operating base complete with a wired perimeter, guard towers, messing facilities, a Post Exchange, gymnasium and a Morale, Welfare and Recreation center spread among command posts, tactical operations centers and base defense operations facilities. Upon our arrival, we quickly moved from the reception area to what we would call home for the next six-to-nine months. The six-man housing units arranged in rows and assigned by unit would further tighten the bond between us as we were all corralled in a tight communal area.

Team Bravo's Area of Operation (AO) consisted of three "abstinas" or counties. They were Kalisia, Osmaci, and Sekovici. Daily "presence" patrols included engaging the local populace by asking questions regarding their general health and welfare, determining local utility capabilities, medical needs, and other infrastructural concerns as well as trying to ease religious tensions among the different groups.

When we arrived we were excited and eager to begin making a difference and changing people's lives. However, we soon realized this was not to be easy. Within weeks we determined the only way to make a long lasting difference was to offer the local populace the tools they needed in order to help themselves. It was definitely the "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach him to fish and you feed him for life" concept. My Soldiers and I quickly learned that life in this country was not one of hustle and bustle as we were used to back home. We learned to slow down and that something as simple as taking the time to sit and share a cup of coffee with someone showed that we cared about the struggle and hardships they had endured. Just taking the time to listen to their concerns about "crooked" police officers and city officials was enough to build a trust and confidence with them that made it easier to calm tensions when feuds between different religious groups arose. A technique we often used to foster a friendship with the children was to bring them school supplies or candy to get them to talk to us about how they viewed the conditions in their town or village. Some of the best ideas for helping the village came from listening to the children and what their desires were and what they thought would be a solution to feuding families or groups. Through the voices and perceptions of the children, we knew just telling them that they couldn't treat each other inhumanly or commit crimes against each other would fall on deaf ears. We had to find a way to influence change and opinions of future generations into an attitude of tolerance and forgiveness.

In a rather successful attempt to build a rapport with the children (as well as their parents), my Soldiers helped clear a field and measure out a soccer ("football") field in a remote village where the kids had no place to play. On a follow up visit we brought some old goals from another village that wasn't using them. Before long kids and adults alike were playing soccer together on the field. We even arranged a village get-together where other Soldiers in Team

Bravo, including the commander, participated in a soccer game between Soldiers and the village team. They had a BBQ and other fun activities that lasted all day. It was amazing to see families put their religious and historical differences aside to come together through sport. Before long, members of the village had begun helping each other repair homes, working crops, and had even fixed up and converted an old abandoned building into a school.

By addressing such concerns, the objective was to lay the groundwork for self reliance and build a mutual trust with the locals in order to achieve cooperation and compliance, not only with the NATO forces but also with their own Security Forces. By encouraging the local populace to help themselves and to find their *own* solutions to their problems, we were encouraging them to find their independence. If we could facilitate bringing electricity, clean water, medical treatment or a school to a small village thus leaving Bosnia a better place than we found it, we felt we would be a success.

After roughly four months of security and presence patrols, we began preparing for the next phase of operations. We began distributing fliers to individuals, businesses, posting them on buildings and telephone poles, as well as broadcasting from the local radio station that NATO Forces would be conducting an "active weapons harvest." This mission would provide an amnesty-type opportunity for the populace to turn in illegal weapons, explosives and other contraband for safe disposal without legal action taken against them. This would be the true test of the previous months' labor.

The concept of the operation for the weapons harvest was to separate our AO into three sectors. We then broke those sectors up into 100-meter grid blocks and identified them by an alpha-numeric designator. Once this was done my platoon was given responsibility for Sector II, which was the abtina of Kalisia. An initial reconnaissance of the sector was conducted to

identify collection point areas that would be manned by my Soldiers to ensure safety and control of the weapons collected. We also identified rally points and prepositioned Quick Reaction Force (QRF) teams in the event that hostilities broke out. My platoon strength of 16 Soldiers was increased with 10 Soldiers; five from each of the two infantry platoons to increase my numbers to allow us to cover the area more quickly. I divided the platoon into three 10-man sections and assigned each of them one-third of the alpha-numeric grid blocks.

With all the preparation completed we began to execute the weapons harvest. My Soldiers went from one 100-meter grid block to the next, house to house giving each household and individual the opportunity to turn in unwanted, dangerous and illegal weapons and explosives without fear of being arrested. The goal was to remove as much of the contraband as possible thus making the environment a safer place. As we executed the operation, we were greeted with varied attitudes. Some were thankful; others were angry and felt we were taking away their ability to defend themselves. We collected weapons and explosives ranging from pistols and AK-47 assault rifles to hand grenades, anti-personnel mines, rocket propelled grenades, crew served machine guns and even anti-tank mines. The origins of the contraband ranged from a number of different countries and eras, as well as ranging in stability and volatility. If an explosive was determined to be unstable, our attached Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) team would use Composition C4 explosive to destroy the item in a safe area as opposed to requiring Soldiers to transport the ordinance back to base.

Once every house in every grid block in our sector had been visited we concluded the weapon harvest by destroying all the weapons and ordinance we had collected. The ordinance was destroyed by EOD and my Soldiers had the task of destroying the weapons. We placed two rows of 12" X 12" timbers laid end-to-end for 30 feet and crisscrossed all the weapons across the

timbers. We then drove a Bradley Fighting Vehicle between the rows of timber over the weapons rendering them useless.

Because of the relationships established with the locals, Team Bravo collected from the willing populace roughly 300 explosive devices and roughly 200 different weapons in the span of 1 week with no incidents. By ensuring very strict safety standards during the conduct of the operation as well as the training preparation, my unit suffered no injuries in what was a very difficult mission to execute. The majority of the population was very cooperative and supportive of the operation. In addition, having collection points set up throughout the AO allowed each patrol to periodically drop off collected hazardous items before they had the opportunity to present more-than-necessary dangers by accidental detonation. In conducting an After Action Review, it was identified that the mission would have been better facilitated to have additional EOD assets available. At times there was only one EOD team per company which meant that patrols had to wait for that support, sometimes for hours. However, overall the weapon harvest was a great success.

This experience is one that I will never forget as I find myself using the lessons learned during the weapon harvest and applying them to the missions of today. Many different techniques exist for implementing change. As Soldiers in the mightiest army in the world, we thought that we could easily step in and fix anything by ourselves. Through this experience I learned that sometimes the best way to help someone is to give them the tools to help themselves. By taking time to understand a little bit about them, their culture, religion, society and their history, we were better equipped to truly understand what they needed in order to truly be helped. Developing these relationships with the local populace was crucial in the success of

our weapon harvest operation. These lessons learned in Bosnia/Herzegovina were ones that would later serve me well during a deployment to Iraq.

ATSS-MH (870)

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Personal Experience Papers

1. I, Craig E. Coates, have submitted a Personal Experience Paper to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences from my participation in Bosnia / Herzegovina that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

(CEC) None  
( ) Other:

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I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 7-16-10

Printed Name: Craig E. Coates

Signature: Craig E Coates

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

Printed Name/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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