

Mission to Boljevce

by Captain Douglas Huber

As members of Tactical Support Team 5, the Civil Affairs team that supports 1-35 Armor in Kosovo, we went up to the village of Novo Brdo to a meeting with the local “municipal coordinator” and representatives of some non-governmental organizations that are working there. We talked about some of the projects that were underway to improve life in this village, a tiny spot north of Gnjilane and east of Pristina. Before the meeting was over, we asked Ed Tawil, the municipal coordinator, if he had any further problems to discuss.

Tawil brought up the case of Desanka Milenkovic, a 91-year-old woman who had not been receiving the Social Security checks she was due. She had become eligible for the monthly payments because her husband had worked in the United States before he passed away in the late 1970s.

Among the casualties of the Allied bombing and the internal conflict in Kosovo, there was a breakdown in the province’s postal service. Mrs. Milenkovic had not received a payment since around May 1999. After I volunteered to try to help her, Tawil gave me her form, a “Social Security Award Certificate” dated October 1979.

Once back at Camp Monteith, my first stop was the Information Superhighway, where I looked up www.ssa.gov. How I remembered that this address was the Social Security Administration Web Page, I will never know. Anyway, I got on the web site, found a 1-800-number, and called on a DSN line. It took me the better part of 15 minutes to get an operator, but once I did, Operator 2 from MacDill Air Force Base patched me through. Finally, on the other end, I caught the last three seconds of an English recording that quickly morphed into Spanish. The only part of the recording I understood was the dial tone at the end, just before it hung up on me.

Back to the Web! I looked up the local offices in Washington D.C. I found a 1-800-number. But it was the *same* as the other one that I’d found earlier! So, I

looked up a branch in Dayton, Ohio. Again, it was the same damn 1-800-number! Moral: don’t go to .gov sites if you want info. So, I turned to yahoo.com and went right to the yellow pages, typing in ‘social security administration.’ Once there, it asked me for a city, so I typed in Washington, D.C. and hit ‘Enter.’ Ten listings came up, all for ‘US Social Security Adm.’ I now had a real phone number, not 1-800-blow-you-off. The first listing was in Baltimore. That seemed close enough to Washington, close being a relative term. I called directly. Here are some excerpts of the phone call:

Commissioner (at least, that’s how he introduced himself): “Commissioner.” (See, I told you.)

Me: Hello sir, my name is Lieutenant Huber and I am calling from Kosovo. I am the civil military affairs officer for my battalion and I am calling about a situation we have here in Kosovo. (At this point, I explained everything about the meeting, and the woman, and the memo.)

Commissioner: Let me have the claim number.

Me: Sure, its... (I read him the number.)

Commissioner: Uh, yes. I see. I don’t think I can help you with this. Let me transfer you. Stand by.

Me: Thank you (I said to a ringing phone).

Some Woman (She also did not introduce herself): Hello?

Me: Hello, my name is Lieutenant Huber (I explained about the meeting, and the woman, and the memo, and how I was transferred).

SW: Okay, can I have the case number?



Me: Sure, its....

SW: Yeah, I don’t think this is my lane, let me transfer you to International Claims.

Me: Thank you. (I don’t know if she heard me, either.)

Some Guy: Hello?

Me: (Once again, I mentioned the meeting, the woman, the memo, the transfers ...)

SG: I know I am going to have to transfer you, but stay on the line so I can get you to a real person.

Me: Thank you. (At this point I hear ringing, then voice mail; ringing, voice mail; ringing, voice mail.)

SG: Hold on, I am still trying to find someone for you.

Me: Thank you. (At this point I hear ringing, then voice mail; ringing, voice mail; ringing, voice mail.)

SG: Still trying

Me: Thank you. (At this point I hear ringing, then voice mail; ringing, voice mail; ringing, voice mail.)

C.P.: (I am using her initials here to protect her. I will explain why later.) Hello?

Me: (One more time: me, Kosovo, meeting, woman, memo, transfers, voice mail ...) Can you help me?

C.P.: I think so, what is the claim number?

Me: (Thinking, "Here we go again.") The number is

C.P.: Okay, what is the problem?

Me: This woman hasn't gotten Social Security in over a year and a half. Is there any way you can send money by wire. Believe it or not, there is a Western Union in downtown Gnjilane.

C.P.: Let me check.

(*Muzak playing ...*)

C.P.: I just checked with the claims manager and we don't wire money. We can set up an EFT (electronic funds transfer) to a neighboring country, but we don't do that in Serbia or Kosovo.

Me: That is going to be tough (At this point, I was trying to visualize how this 91-year-old woman would get to Macedonia or Greece).

C.P.: And there is no mail there?

Me: The only way that mail comes in and out of this country is by U.S. Army airplane or U.S. Army helicopter.

C.P.: What is your address?

Me: (I gave her my address).

C.P.: I guess I could send it to you and you could give it to her.

The conversation continued and C.P. said that she would send the check out right away. (I'm calling her by her initials here because I fear she might be fired if her bosses actually knew that she was extremely helpful and very patient with me and was one of the most sincere, caring, government employees I have ever dealt with over the phone, and — for those of you who know that I can be sarcastic — I really do mean all of that.

She even asked how it was that I ended up talking to her. I explained the cruel game of pass the buck in which I was the buck. She said that it was sad how people would do whatever they could to get out of work. I again thanked her for her work, help, and trust in a man she had never met and claimed to be calling from Kosovo. She did ask me to confirm the woman's age (following the Reagan mantra of "Trust, but verify."). But once I did that, it was a done deal.

After getting off the phone, I happened to look at the Award Certificate that I had gotten from Ed and noticed that it had come from the same Balti-

more office in 1979! Amazing. I don't know if any other branch would have been able to help me. But I do know that they wouldn't have treated me like C.P. did.

Civil Affairs in Kosovo

While Mrs. Milenkovic's check wends its way to our unit's mailroom in Kosovo, let me tell you what an S5 does. My job is unique in that I work with, or for, *four* field grade officers. I report to the battalion executive officer, but I work with the S3 in order to execute the battalion commander's intent. Finally, the tactical support team (Civil Affairs) OIC is a major and I work with her to manage, supervise, coordinate, and execute humanitarian assistance in sector. (That may sound pretty ethereal, but the less you understand, the more leeway I have. Nice.) Anyway, I do everything from act as the Task Force Falcon Contracting Officer's Representative on humanitarian projects that the U.S. Government funds, to getting sheet plastic from non-governmental organizations for farmers who want to cover their barns. There is no such thing as a typical day for an S5.

The whole KFOR effort rests upon the success of the humanitarian mission. We can stand guard on checkpoints all day, ("On point for the nation," as we are fond of saying here in USAREUR), but until these people can get (and keep) jobs, and have a sustainable economy with a quality of life above that of most American street cats, then we are never going to leave because there will always be problems.

About two weeks later, I got the check from the Social Security Administration. Mrs. Milenkovic was owed 14,082 big ones in back SSA payments. Not bad for a country that has an average annual income of around \$900!

We coordinated with Ed Tawil to meet him in Novo Brdo. We planned to cash the check and take the woman her money; the only problem was that we had no way of cashing the check. First, I decided to check out MicroBank, one of Gnjilane's more upscale businesses. The woman behind the (bulletproof?) glass said that if we wanted to cash a check from the U.S. Treasury it would take a while. Because (and this is how she explained it), the bank would have to send the check back through a clearing house which, in turn, sends it back to the Treasury Department, which then blesses off on the check. Then, once the money is released, it has to stay in an

account. The poor woman could not just cash the check. I asked how much this "service" might cost, and the woman said they had just done this same type of transaction for someone else and there was a DM 580 fee on the \$600 check. Doing the math, it added up to almost half the check! We decided to look elsewhere.

Next, MAJ Hermsen, the Tactical Support Team officer in charge asked our finance office if they could cash it. SSG Lizardi, the noncommissioned officer in charge, said he would have to make a phone call to confirm. Later, he called back with two enthusiastic thumbs up. We were ready!

We all met in the Civil Affairs office. It was me, MAJ Hermsen, SSG Selby, SGT Indra, SPC Zolle (all from CA), SSG Lizardi and SPC Delgado (of Finance, complete with locked briefcase), SSG Schafer of Public Affairs (because the Army likes good press more than God hates a coward). Then there was Mario, the Serb interpreter, who is actually from Macedonia (but, then again, none of the Albanians in this country are from Albania, either) and Val, our Albanian interpreter. We were ready to go. After a quick briefing by the major, we saddled up and rolled out the gate.

We traveled 40 minutes to Novo Brdo where we were to meet Ed Tawil and his interpreter. We got there 20 minutes early (that's just what the Army does) and waited for Ed. He arrived promptly at 10 a.m., but said he wanted to pick up Mrs. Milenkovic's cousin on the way. No problemo. As we pulled away from the building, I was thinking that I was about 5 minutes away from mission accomplishment, handing off the money and making one little old lady very rich indeed. Well....

Five minutes later, we approached a turnoff that didn't look too inviting. We were traveling in two regular HMMWVs, one "up-armored" Hum-vee, and Ed's four-wheel drive Range Rover. Leading the way, Ed struggled to get up the hill, as the road was cut deep with ruts. SSG Selby tried next, and her heavy HMMWV could not make it. We dismounted, found a by-pass through someone's garden, and got back on the road. The road began to climb and turn, not a great combo when dealing with a vehicle that is almost 5,000 pounds and over 6 feet wide. "The road clears up ahead. The only bad part is this first kilometer," Ed assured us. Right!

After the first kilometer, the road still sucked. As we approached a bend, Ed's vehicle and the two light HMMWVs made it with no problem, but then came the heavier up-armored vehicle. It started to slide, finally coming to a stop in the clearing that was below the road.

As we were jockeying the HMMWV around in the clearing, we saw some people about 2 kilometers out and Mario said, almost to himself, "It looks like they are in uniform. Maybe TMK?"

TMK (or KPC, depending on your ethnicity), used to be the UCK, a group of Albanian insurgents that gained the upper hand after the allies began the bombing campaign that forced the Serbs to leave. We didn't pay much attention to them as we struggled to get the HMMWV back up on the road, but then Mario said, "I think they have weapons."

Uh-oh.

As they got closer, I saw that these unidentified people in uniform did, indeed, have rifles slung across their backs. I was really, really wishing that I'd carried binoculars. As they got closer, we discerned their nationality... they were Russian! Why would there be Russian soldiers in our sector? Ten or 15 years ago, I might have been a little worried (my grandfather still has a hard time digesting that we run joint operations with the Russkies) but, having worked with the Russians in Bosnia at Camp Ugljivic, I greeted the three soldiers with a hearty handshake and a loud "Hello."

They spoke more English than I do Russian, so they said "Hello" back and asked, in Russian, what the problem was. Ed Tawil started speaking with them in their native tongue. They helped us get the HMMWV back on the road, but then we faced another hill. SSG Selby started up the hill, but again slid back off the side of the road and got stuck.

At this point, one of the Russian soldiers tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Man!" as he held out his hands in closed fists, as if he was driving. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face as I told SSG Selby that the Russian suggested that a male driver might be better able to get up the hill. Her reply? "Sir, do you know how to say 'f--- off' in Russian?"

On that note, I explained to the Russians (through very eloquent hand and

arm signals) that SSG Selby would keep driving and that we would push. MAJ Hermsen did a quick risk assessment that consisted of little more than a genuflect and a silent prayer. We pushed and the HMMWV slowly moved up the hill until it got to the top!

The Russians were ready to leave, but not before I got a picture. We all huddled



A souvenir snapshot records the unexpected meeting with Russian troops who helped push the up-armored HMMWV back onto this muddy Kosovo road. Ed Tawil is at far left, and Mrs. Milenkovic's cousin is kneeling beside the author, who is standing at far right.

dled around the Humvee that we rescued and about 16 cameras (both Russian and American) appeared to capture this Kodak moment. So, after the pictures and another round of hearty handshakes, the Russians set off on foot and we were ready to roll.

As we traveled higher into the mountains, we were making pretty good time until we got to another rough spot. The first three vehicles made it up around the bend with no problems. I told SPC Zolle to stop at the top of the hill to ensure that SSG Selby and MAJ Hermsen made it up behind us. As I was about to get out of the Humvee, a voice came across the radio, "We're stuck." I walked back down around the curve to see the Humvee with its left rear tire hanging off the edge of the road. After checking out the situation, all we had to do was keep it in first gear and creep forward, then straighten out the wheel. Only I pushed this time.

We were back on the road, but the road was still not good. Only four more kilometers to go, Ed assured us. So we continued up. Then we went down. Then we went up again. Now, most of the road had a near-vertical drop of about 150 to 200 meters on the right side, so I suggested to SPC Zolle that it might be good to keep left. Just a thought. We were now, officially, in

the mountains, although at one point the road seemed to smooth out and we saw a village on the next hilltop. We drove up to the village, then through it, and continued down the other side of the mountain before encountering another one. I would have to say that the road got worse at this point. Soup would be a good word to describe the consistency of the top six inches of soil.

Once again, the heavier HMMWV slipped off the road, but this was a tad more precarious than before, considering the aforementioned cliff. She managed to drive the vehicle back onto the road without loss of life or limb. Slogging along at the top of a ridge line, we finally saw the small village of Boljevice. For those of you without a map, don't bother looking in an atlas. For those of you with a map, if you are looking for Boljevice, start in the Russian sector, because that is where we ended up.

As we got out of the HMMWVs in front of the woman's house, Ed mentioned that she lives with some of her family. In fact, she lived with her daughter, her son, her granddaughter, and a couple of great grandsons and daughters. To be perfectly honest, I lost count at the second or third generation.

In what is typical of Kosovar hospitality, all 11 of us were invited into their small house. We dropped our boots off in the first room, proceeded to the dining room, and all sat around a big table. After brief introductions, we explained the purpose of our visit. There were a lot of flashbulbs going off (God bless PAO), coffee was brewed, and glasses of Rakia were poured. Rakia is similar to grain alcohol. (In America, we would call this moonshine, Everclear,



Above, Mrs. Milenkovic's cousin helps her endorse the Social Security check with an "X" and a fingerprint.

Above right, SP Delgado cashes the benefits check and stacks the bills on the living room table.

At right, Desanka, her Deutsche Marks, and the author.

Below right, Mrs. Milenkovic's extended family, NGO representatives, and LT Huber's party pose for a snapshot before returning to Camp Montieth, mission accomplished.



or jet fuel.) According to Ed, the village of Boljevce makes the best Rakia in all of Kosovo. Of course, I wouldn't know, since KFOR guys and gals shrugged off the hard stuff in favor of an orange drink and coffee, but Ed and the family did no such shrugging and consumed their Rakia with glee.

We asked Desanka to sign the check, but it turned out that she is illiterate. So, she did what any illiterate person might do to endorse a check. She put a big 'X' on the back and used a stamp pad to put her fingerprint next to it. You can't really forge a fingerprint, can you? I didn't think so.

I am sure I heard the finance sergeant let out a sigh but, what the hell can you do? Since we'd already humped over 29,000 Deutsche Marks half-way across Kosovo, there wasn't any turning back now. The finance people took the check and filled out some more paperwork. I gave them my DD Form 2 ID card and then signed something to show I was exchanging the dollars for Deutsche Marks (I am sure that I will be hearing from the IRS next year). Then, SPC Delgado began putting the stacks of DMs on the table. Three six-inch piles later, all of the money was neatly stacked in front of Desanka. All she could say was "falla" (spelled phonetically for those of you trying to learn Serbian), or "thank you." We talked

some more before we got one final group shot of all of us out front.

We asked if there was an easier way out of this place and, of course, there was. We headed east (over some better roads and, admittedly, we did ford a river) until we hit the "hardball" road that runs through Kamenica. We broke south through Kamenica and then west on Route Stag until we ended up back at Camp Monteith.

Just another day ...

CPT Doug Huber graduated from Ohio State University with a BA in journalism. After graduating AOB in March 1998, he served as a platoon leader in Bosnia, then as a line company XO. He has completed 7 training deployments (4 Hohenfels, 3 Grafts). Currently the S5 in Kosovo, he begins ACCC in May.