

Bosnia

By Capt. Linda Jackson, Greenwood, Nova Scotia

Today, there are military nurses deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of the Canadian SFOR NATO contingent. I have just recently served a six-month deployment in Bosnia. I was part of a two-nurse team at the Canadian Headquarter camp in Velika Kladusa or VK, its more common name.

There are approximately 300 military members and 150 civilian employees who are stationed in VK. The military members are part of the National Command Element and the National Support Element. They provide leadership, logistic, and administrative support to the Battle Group who are stationed throughout the Canadian area of operations.

The medical facility in VK can be compared to a rural emergency department. It is referred to as the UMS or unit medical station. It is staffed by a medical officer, medical technicians, nursing officers, a lab technician and an x-ray technician. There is also a three-bed holding facility that has cardiac monitoring capabilities. A typical patient will be diagnosed with gastroenteritis and require IV rehydration. However, we also cared for man with septicemia secondary to a cellulitis. He even tested positive for MRSA!

Critically ill and surgical patients are transferred to a civilian hospital two hours away in Zagreb, Croatia. Transfer is either by land or air. The Canadians have two types of ambulances: soft-skin or armour. The armour ambulance, or Bison as it is called, is a tank! Air transfers are done by the Dutch military who provide a Cougar helicopter and a medical flight team. If the patient needs to return to Canada, a Canadian medical flight team comes to pick them up by airbus.

I did get to visit a Croatian civilian hospital. There are no privacy curtains in the patient rooms! Their IV catheters are different than the protecticaths we use in Nova Scotia. They do not have saline locks. Instead, they have a port that is

part of the cathlon. They do not use pumps. They use tubing that has a flow regulator.

The Nursing Officers are responsible for running several clinics including immunization, allergy desensitization, blood pressure and nutrition. We also work in the pharmacy dispensing narcotics and other medications. We give all of the intravenous medications in the clinic. The Nursing Officers are also responsible for the medical records stored in the camp! What a paper nightmare!

The medical facilities in the camps are only able to give life-and/or limb-saving care to the local Bosnians. Part of the SFOR mandate is for Bosnia to rebuild its infrastructure including health care. However, I also worked at the R3MIMU facility in Sipovo. This is a hospital that is staffed with British, Dutch, Canadian, and Icelandic military medical professionals. It has general and orthopedic surgical abilities, an ER, 10 ward beds, and a four-bed ICU. The local Bosnians are also cared for at this facility. It is very challenging to provide medical and nursing care when one cannot speak the language. Fortunately, there are interpreters available 24/7.

As a Nursing Officer, I am not only a nurse, but also a soldier. In Bosnia, I had a 'go bag' that I had to take everywhere with me when I travelled in the country. The go bag consisted of a flak vest with bulletproof Kevlar plates, another vest that held emergency supplies including three ration packs, a Kevlar helmet, and a gas mask. I also had to carry a 9 mm pistol with a magazine of 10 bullets. No rounds in the chamber though!

Bosnia was an interesting experience. It made me realize how lucky I am to be a Canadian.

The picture below is the Bison. It is a tank that has been converted to an ambulance. There is room in the back for one nurse to care for two stretcher casualties. It actually rides very smoothly. 

