

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

by Gabriel Granatstein

## Introduction

Eleven members of the Canadian Forces make up the entirety of *Operation Boreas*, the Canadian contribution to the European Union Force (EUFOR) in Bosnia. Our role is to serve as the Liaison and Observation Team (LOT) Sector Headquarters (SHQ) for Canton 1 (C1) in Bihac, located in the western part of the nation, as part of Multinational Task Force (North West). There are two important facets of *Operation Boreas*. First, there is the impact that such a small group of people is able to have upon such a large area. Second, there is the manner by which the composition of the team, primarily with respect to its diversity, can positively impact the mission. Needless to say, our impact in Bosnia is also directly related to the achievements of successive rotations of Canadian troops in the area over the past 12 years.

## Background

The Canadian mission in Bosnia has been of substantial duration already. Canadian troops have been on the ground in the former Yugoslavia since the United Nations (UN) intervened with the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) during the early 1990s. This mission transitioned to the more robust NATO forces of the Implementation Force (IFOR), and then the Stabilization Force (SFOR). The latest iteration of the international presence is EUFOR, which, somewhat curiously, also includes contributions from Canada, New Zealand, Chile, and other non-EU nations. This opinion piece will not recount the history of the conflict, nor the history of Canadian soldiers in the area – this has been accomplished many times already. It will instead focus upon the LOT role, and how it differs from most other missions.

## Operation Boreas

The Canadian mission is split into two distinct entities. The C1 LOT SHQ staff exercises command and control over all of Canton 1, coordinating and collating the activities and information obtained by teams within three LOT Houses, which are located in Cazin (manned by Norwegians), Sanski Most (manned by Chileans), and Bihac (manned by Canadians). I am a member of the Bihac LO Team. According to our mission statement, the role of both the LO Teams and the SHQ is to ‘feel the pulse’ of our area of operations, and to report those findings to the Multinational Task Force Commander. We are also tasked with the role of encouraging cooperation and communication among the local authorities, something that is not at present commonplace in

Bosnia. It is a very broad mandate – one that allows each team and each individual within the team an immense amount of latitude as to how the mission is achieved. This freedom is amplified by the relatively peaceful situation on the ground, which generally permits a freedom of movement that is essential to mission success.

As an LO Team, we collect information through patrols and meetings with community leaders, police, Cantonal Ministers, State Border Service, the European Union Police Mission, local citizens, and various other agencies. Our job is to be *seen* (presence patrols), and to know as much as possible about what is going on in the communities within our Area of Responsibility (AOR). In the municipality of Bihac, we are responsible for 35 separate communities, with an approximate total population of 60,000, and we meet on a regular basis with community leaders and citizens. Building trust is a large part of our job. If the local authorities do not trust us as individuals, they will be less likely to share sensitive information. It is important that we are not seen as just ‘EUFOR,’ but as people who care about both the job and the country. We foster relationships and often are invited into homes and businesses for socializing. Given that our lodgings are located within the local communities, we also have established close relationships with the local population. For example, in Kulen Vakuf, a town in the south of our AOR, Canadian soldiers helped rebuild a firehouse over the last few years. Our team has coordinated the donation of school supplies from schools in Canada to needy schools in the area, and, at the request of a local leader, we helped facilitate contact between organizations at home and in Bosnia to raise the funding required to rebuild an abandoned Jewish cemetery in the area.

The EUFOR mandate does not permit us to rebuild schools or roads, or to provide any monetary assistance. We have no budget for such endeavours. The LO Teams are not the Civil-Military Cooperation Teams (CIMIC) of the past, who were perceived by the local populace to be roaming the country with large sums of money to dispense. However, when we meet with community leaders, they often ask for this kind of assistance, and it can be very frustrating to listen to the problems of thousands of people and not be able to help. The common refrain from community leaders is: “Why am I meeting with you if you can’t do anything for me?” On the other hand, giving the public a voice is often very gratifying for the local communities. They see us as impartial observers, and our meetings as forums to voice their concerns about their elected officials and law enforcement agencies.

In general, the population does not trust its elected officials. In the course of dozens of meetings, we have heard the same criticisms: “The politicians are corrupt. They are only in politics for personal gain. There is no progress.” And, for the most part, they are correct. The system is structured institutionally so that little is accomplished. For example, the executive function of the country is composed of a tri-partite presidency, consisting of one president from each ethnic group. Each president serves eight months as the chair of the presidency, and each president can undo the changes of the president who served previously. These inefficiencies are replicated in different ways at the federal and municipal levels. The local population notes these inefficiencies, and is extremely frustrated by them. When compounded by high unemployment, there is a general feeling of despair. However, the endemic corruption has created a micro-society of extremely wealthy people. It is not uncommon to see a horse and buggy sharing the road with a Porsche or a Mercedes. Living here, one can understand the feeling of hopelessness and inequity. However, from the broader perspective of the international community in Bosnia, things have progressed significantly. There is no war at present, and there are relatively few incidents of ethnic violence. From a military perspective, Bosnia now enjoys a relatively safe and secure environment. However, from a political and economic standpoint, there are still major unresolved issues. As soldiers, we have had to take a different approach in obtaining relevant information from the local community.

The ‘human touch’ is essential to this mission, and it is also something that I believe we have achieved in Bosnia. Whether by design or by chance, our team is incredibly diverse, and it is that diversity that helps us succeed. Previous iterations of Canadian rotations here were composed, for the most part, of formed infantry units. These units were excellent for the task at hand – providing security in a dangerous and volatile tactical situation. However, the Canadian Forces (CF) has seen fit to move away from this type of unit for this particular mission, from formed units of combat soldiers, to selecting volunteer ‘augmentees’ from across the Canadian Forces. The nature of this selection is the key to our diversity. We are split almost evenly between Reserve and Regular Force personnel. Our commanding officer is an air force logistics Human Reliability Officer of Croatian descent, who speaks the local language fluently, but, more importantly, he has an innate understanding of the culture. The chief clerk is from the navy. The LO Team Leader is a logistics captain, who has 25 years of service in the CF, and who has served on previous overseas tours. I am his subordinate, a 25-year-old reserve lieutenant from Montréal, halfway through a law degree with four years of army service. We are completely different, and our disparate backgrounds allow us to approach problems from different

angles, and arrive at somewhat unique and distinctive solutions. Our differing educational backgrounds also give us an advantage in dealing with economic and political issues. Some of the people we meet prefer the ‘grey hair’ approach of an older captain with years of experience. Others appreciate the enthusiasm of a young lieutenant. We both have our roles to play, and we both bring different skills to the table. This dynamic is replicated throughout the entire Canadian contingent.

### Conclusions

As Canadians, we have a tendency to measure our success by the impact we have or the changes we make. Have we made an impact here? Is that even the goal? On a broader scale, I do not believe that we have been able to effect any major changes, but nor do I think that this is our mission. However, from a EUFOR-mission perspective, I believe we have been successful. We have our ‘finger on the pulse of the community,’ and we continue to have the necessary situational awareness. We have coordinated conferences, bringing together different governmental actors from the three ethnic groups, and we have brought local authorities together to discuss issues that they would have otherwise dealt with alone. In order to measure our success, we need to re-evaluate just exactly what *constitutes* success. I do not believe that our achievements here should be gauged by our effects upon the ‘big picture.’ Bosnia is at a point in its recovery where, for a change to be successful, it must come from within, and not from without.

The mantra we have heard since deploying to theatre is: “Bosnian solutions for Bosnian problems.” For example, the international community can provide only the structure for elections, it cannot tell the citizens for whom to vote. It can only provide the political structure, not ensure that the political structure is efficient, or devoid of corruption. There are, however, differences to be made. From a Canadian mission perspective, we do make a small but important impact. We demonstrate to people that you can live a life free of religious or ethnic tension. By simply waving the Canadian flag and being here, we are making a difference. The act of coordinating the donation of school supplies, from a Jewish school in Montreal, to a Muslim school in Bihac, may seem minor, but, by showing a group of children here that religion does not make a difference, we play a hand in molding the future of Bosnia. That type of act, repeated over the history of Canadian involvement here, has made a profound impact, and it makes our total contribution to Bosnia a significant success.

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