

Reminiscences from the Balkans

Hard cover within buildings (if possible in basement cellars) is definitely better than being in a tent out in the open, as has proven to be the case since time immemorial. I remember vividly my own first deployment to the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, to Bugojno (central Bosnia, October 1994 - March 1995) where we set up our tented FST (then labelled a Medical Support Troop) within an abandoned sheepskin factory, primarily to obtain cover from the elements (essential in a harsh Bosnian winter, with recorded temperature going down to minus 17C, or was that minus 27C?, early January - it hurt to breathe outdoors, I remember that). The remaining sheepskins on the drying racks came in very handy as rugs within our tents, I still have a couple of them. The factory building also provided some protection from artillery fire: the front line was barely four km away, and shelling from the Serb lines was a frequent if not daily occurrence, with a predictable break around coffee time, and usually over by lunchtime (!).

Mind you, the factory provided precious little protection from a SAM-2 missile fired by the Serbs in a ground attack role, which detonated immediately overhead: it was like a lightning strike and simultaneous thunderclap just above our heads. I remember being temporarily blinded by the flash of light, the remaining glass windows in the factory shattering above us, and my knees momentarily giving way as we involuntarily dropped to the ground. Fortunately not a direct hit, but a bit too close for comfort. That's memories for you...

Another example of hard cover was in Kosovo, at the village of Lipljan just outside Pristina, in summer 1999, when I deployed as consultant general surgeon with 22 Field Hospital; we went prepared to set up in tents, but took over an abandoned juvenile delinquent prison instead. Felt quite appropriate somehow, we were a mischievous lot ... Incidentally, that was Tim Hodgetts' first deployment as consultant emergency physician. We slept in the cells or small dormitories - quite comfortable really; resus was set up in a classroom, and the operating theatre in the next one (with my digital camera and simple telemedicine kit in the corner, in frequent use between operations).¹ The large indoor basketball court was converted to a single mixed ward with rows and rows of beds. Ward rounds were a multi-lingual cultural delight, as we cared for Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, males and females, young and old, [British] military and local civilians, all side by side. Wearing the Red Cross armband never felt more appropriate. My favourite spot was in the adjacent rose garden, a haven of peace, which provided much needed respite in between cases when the going got tough, as one was surrounded by beautiful fragrant roses ...



A Kosovar rose

¹ See 'Telemedicine kept simple' <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/telemedicine/>