

My Bosnian Deployment

—Michael Reichert

I was in the Army for almost two years before being deployed to Bosnia. I had been to Korea; but, as I was soon to find out, Korea was nothing compared to wartime Bosnia. It was January of 2000 when I joined the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment on a military flight straight to this warzone. As prepared as we thought we were for the “police action,” we could not have expected what awaited us. Everyone told us that the war was over and that we were there just to keep order. But we soon found out that the war was still going on and we were right in the middle of it. As I stepped off of the plane, my unit and I were put on a bus and driven to a camp built not too long before we arrived. The camp used to be a pig farm, so you can imagine the smell.

There were many times that were hard, as if we were in a living hell. And there were times when we were called for stupid and crazy missions. There were also times when we were off for a day and would get together and come up with fun things to do. I will start with the crazy and funny things we did to occupy our time. Then, I will move on to the absurd missions before discussing the more hellish times.

Everyone needed to get their minds off of missing their families, the chaos, and the fatigue from time to time. So, we would do crazy things. For example, we would head to a water hole and jump in and just act crazy. We would wrestle for therapeutic reasons and to get our minds off all the crap going on all around us. Some of the guys even made sumo wrestler outfits to wrestle in.

There were times when we had the weirdest and most absurd missions you can think of. Once, we got called on a mission because a man moved his prized pig into someone else’s home. The culprit tried to tell us that he thought the people had moved out; and, since he was living next door, it was necessary for his pig to have the house all to himself. It was our job to try to get the man to

have the pig move out of the house so the homeowners could move back in. But the pig did not leave easily (thanks to the efforts of his owner). As a result, one of our men ended up saying “screw this” and shot the pig. The man went nuts and the Army had to pay him for this pig and three generations of the pigs that would never be born.

Another funny thing happened when we got picked for a security run-through in a very small town. We stopped the humvees and got out to talk with some of the town’s people. After about forty-five minutes, a hoard came charging at us with pitchforks, shovels, and brooms. We looked at our Captain and asked, “Sir, what do we do?” Since they weren’t armed with weapons, he told us not to shoot and to get in the humvees. My roommate, Sherwood, was surrounded by the time the rest of us were in the humvees. He had no other choice than to start hitting the people with the butt of his weapon as he was pummeled by brooms, shovels, rakes, etc. Then, our Brazilian counterparts in the peacekeeping mission pulled up with riot gear and started taking these people out left and right with batons. It was just so funny, I still laugh about it today.

Now comes the hardest part of any war zone, the being shot at. In war, death is all around you and, afterward, the memories don’t go away. Bosnia was still a warzone even though they wanted to call it a “police action.” I was shot at—at least four times—and somehow I am still here today. I never got hit. Either someone was watching over me, or, everyone that shot at me was a very bad shot. I have seen death and I have smelled death. Sometimes, I remember death as a person and remind him, “Nice try asshole, but I’m not going quite yet.”

The smell and spectacle of death is something you never forget. Every once in a while, I can still smell it and I see the men’s faces that I had to kill. The thing that haunts me the most are reminders of a mission where we had to secure a mass grave site. Apparently, some guy had killed innocent people and decided to hide the bodies all in one place. We were called there to secure the area while

locals dug up the people for proper burial as well as to find the evidence needed to convict the murderer.

When we arrived, the smell of rotting flesh filled the air. I was told to pull the first guard shift around the mass-grave site. During one of my patrols, I made the huge mistake of looking down: The body of a little girl was still there, holding onto a little stuffed rabbit. The little girl was wearing a purple dress; she still had a blindfold on her eyes. And she was just thrown on top of all the other bodies. I can't get that image out of my head.

It hits me especially hard in my dreams. I wake up in cold sweats and sometimes I wake up screaming, I have even hit my girlfriend in my sleep and not realized I had done it until the next morning. In waking life, the smell hits me when I least expect it. To this day, anything that reminds me of what I smelled the day I saw that little girl will cause flashbacks. I go back to that day and it seems real even though I'm no longer there. I still have anxiety attacks.



My military service is something I will never forget. Whether they are of good times or bad times, the memories will always be with me as they are with any other soldier. But I am out of the Army now and my prayers and best wishes are with the soldiers of today.