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The Kosovo Crisis

The Kosovo crisis began in early 1998 when large-scale fighting broke out, resulting in the displacement of some 300,000 people. A ceasefire was agreed in October 1998 which enabled refugees to find shelter, averting an impending humanitarian crisis over the winter. A Verification Mission was deployed under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, violence continued and the situation worsened significantly in January 1999. A peace conference, held in Paris, broke up on 19th March with the refusal of the Yugoslav delegation to accept a peaceful settlement.

At 1900 hours GMT on 24th March, NATO forces began air operations over the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in pursuit of a resolution to the Kosovo crisis.

Introduction

Good Friday, April 2nd, 1999

Five men were having a drink in their local pub in Urmston, on the outskirts of Manchester. They decided to do something to help the Kosovar refugees in Albania.

It was unimaginable to think that in just a couple of weeks these ordinary men and the people of Urmston would be able to collect and sort 300 tonnes of aid and mobilise it, all the way to Albania, but they did. With help from local churches, collection points were set up around Urmston and soon the whole of Manchester was involved.

Within a few days these five men were to see their idea receive support from the district, the city, and also other parts of the country.

This is my story of how I became involved and an experience I shall never forget.

The Home Front

Across the road from the Britannia Inn there was a large empty shop owned by the Co-op. It had been empty for some time. Local churches set up collection points and the empty Co-op department store that was let to the group free of charge became a receiving and sorting station. Thousands of boxes began to arrive. Hundreds of yards of tape, pallets and labels, also rolls of cling film were needed to secure the loads.

Many people spent hundreds of hours collecting and sorting out clothing, toiletries, bedding, food, toys, in fact almost everything you might need if you were homeless in a foreign country. They were even given a fork lift truck! The building once again came alive, people just walked in off the street to help.

On my arrival at this newly formed depot, I was welcomed by a lady who told me to: "Hang your coat over there so it won't get lost and if you come this way, I'll show you what to do." She introduced herself and wrote my name on a piece of sticky paper. "Here, stick this on you so we all know your name".

I looked around and everyone had a sticker. It was a good idea and we soon got to know each other. There were mums there that I had seen in the play ground when I took my daughters to school. I'd only ever nodded to them in the past. There were people I'd recognized from other church events. I even spotted my Mum under a pile of clothes. Mum and Dad, in fact all the family eventually got involved.

A group of youngsters from the Air Training Corps were helping stack boxes. Young and old were all working as fast as they could there was a sense of urgency all the time. The radio was on in the back ground and when the news came on everything would go quiet for a few moments while we listened for any news on Kosovo.

The quiet was disturbed. "Gents' trousers?" someone would shout, "Over here" came the reply. They had had to get organized and quickly. As each box was filled a further pile of bags would appear through the door.

There was a large door on to the main street. Cars would park up outside on the yellow lines to unload. Fortunately the road was closed a half mile up the road due to road works and the traffic was relatively quiet, with the exception of a constant arrival of volunteer drivers with cars, trailers, vans, and even a horse box. From a half dozen collection points around Urmston there were now too many to number. Word had spread right across Greater Manchester and the bags were coming in thick and fast. Some collections came from as far away as Cornwall and Penrith. This activity continued from nine in the morning until ten at night, and as time got nearer to departure some folk worked through the night to pack the wagons.

Whilst all this was going on, back in the Britannia, the management team had the headache of sorting out the finance and the logistics of moving all the aid across Europe. Routes, fuel, money, clearance to travel at night, (It is illegal to travel at night in some EEC countries on Bank holidays,) ferry tickets and visas. These were just a few of the hundred and one things that had to be done. Volunteer HGV drivers were sought via the local radio. In all 30 drivers came forward, three or four with continental experience. Most had little or no experience of driving on the continent! The drivers' professions varied from street cleaning operators, dustbin wagon drivers, taxi drivers, a social worker, a garden paving worker, builders, mechanics, a shop worker and a few professional truckers. They all had Class 1 HGV licences but most had not driven for years. All had their reasons for going.

It was decided that such a large convoy should have some support, a mechanic, a cook, a fork-lift truck driver and a video cameraman, who would travel in a Ford Transit Minibus.

Travelling in the Toyota Previa people carrier were the rest of the team, Gareth T the local radio reporter, Dr Irvin A - a local GP - and our medical team leader, my brother Philip, an intensive care nurse with mountain rescue experience, and myself an ambulance paramedic.

Dr Irvin was going to stay in Albania for a few weeks and return under his own steam. Also on board was Team leader John F. The two named drivers for the Previa were John and myself.

Sunday 18th April 99

It wasn't until Sunday that my place had definitely been confirmed. I had a week of mixed emotions. I hadn't been abroad for 19 years and my passport was out of date. My Dad took me to Liverpool to get a new one. I couldn't eat, I was working nights, I could not sleep. I had lists of things in my mind, and my head was in a turmoil. Greater Manchester Ambulance Service lent me some equipment but no one would insure me to practice in Europe, although I could practice in Albania! The Doc said I'd be covered if I acted under his supervision! It wasn't until Thursday night when I had finally packed, that I ate a good meal and slept well.

St George's Day

Friday 23rd April 99

The convoy of 15 HGV's (40ft Trailers) was supposed to leave Urmston at 1pm. Linda S who was in charge of co-coordinating the event was having last minute problems. As I was talking to Linda the Mayor came into the Co-op to wish us well. All our families were present outside the Britannia Inn. As were Councillor Dave Acton and our MP Beverly Hughes, the press, local radio reporters and hundreds of children from the nearby school. The children had made greetings cards which we were to take with us.

Led by a police escort the trucks eventually started to roll, to the cheers of those who weren't crying. A small child leaned through the car window and handed us a red paper rose he had made at school. John attached it to the windscreen and it stayed there for the rest of the journey. We were off, or so we thought, but about two miles up the road we stopped at the Trafford Centre car park, the drivers had been promised sleeping bags and there were still problems with paper work. The police wanted us out of Urmston as we were causing a lot of congestion and we were running late. There was no sign of the CB radios and we only had two or three mobile phones between us. We also had to leave one vehicle because it was too tall for the ferry. What a start!

We eventually left the Trafford Centre at 1730 hrs. There had been a bad accident on the M6 so we changed our route and travelled down the A1. This caused some confusion and some drivers went down the M1. The convoy was split before we had left Yorkshire. Eventually we met up at Dover, where we were greeted by a Round Table member who had come especially to wish us well. It was about 0500 hrs!

Tour de France

Saturday 24th April 99 0615hrs

We left Dover for Calais, and had a good breakfast on the ship. It was a calm crossing, slightly misty. We were all tired. The white cliffs vanished in the distance. We all had badges which stated our name and mission. People would wish us well whilst we went about our business. We landed in Calais and set down for a nine hour break, to comply with the drivers' tachographs. We stopped at a truck stop where there was a cafe and a shower.

At about 0900hrs we were disturbed by some shouting near the trailer next to us. As one of our lads investigated he saw a knife come through the side of the trailer and a family of refugees climbed out. They walked over to the shop where the proprietor gave them some bread and then they walked off into the distance. At the same truck stop some minutes later, I was in the shop when a large group of men climbed out of another trailer only to be arrested by the French police.

At 1800hrs we left the dock area only to discover one of our drivers had turned left on to the wrong side of the dual carriageway, unfortunately just at the same time as a police van was passing. He tried to cross the central reservation, got stuck and could neither pull off or reverse. The policeman was not happy. He spoke in English "You shut up. I speak. You are in the sh*t". He was serious! Colin, who is a professional driver, went forward and asked the policeman for five minutes, he gave him two. Colin took his own unit and trailer up to the next roundabout and then manoeuvred his rig so that they were back to back and he pushed the other rig off the reservation.

We did not know it at the time, but Colin was to come up trumps many times as the journey progressed. His experience and confidence was to save the day on many occasions. We drove on through the evening and on into the night.

Sunday 25th April 99

We passed a bad road accident in France. All the emergency services were there so we sailed on by, but it was later reported by the press (not Gareth) that we had been involved in the incident. This was not the case and unfortunately some relatives heard this report back home. We stopped for another nine hour break. Those of us who were in the car had to sleep sitting up or recline the seats as far as they would go without squashing the person behind. The truckers had bunks in their cabs. Sleeping was difficult because we couldn't shut out the light, there were no curtains in the car! As time ticked on, it got to the time when I'd normally be getting ready for church. My thoughts were with my family back home and my friends at church.

The convoy got away to a good start. We drove on ahead to notify the toll booth operators that we were coming through with a large convoy. The convoy was a sight to see. On one occasion I looked back through a motorway bridge to see all the vehicles coming round a bend. The view was so impressive it was like some military exercise. Unfortunately I could not get to my camera quickly enough.

The medical team was in demand! We had dealt with athletes foot, headaches, muscular neck strain and one guy was worried about his chest. The doctor checked him over.

It was too sunny to sleep. Having driven for the best part of 12 hrs with two short breaks I tried.

It was 1500hrs, Mike B and I met in the cafe, some of the lads were at the bar. We talked and prayed together. We were just standing praying when the doctor also joined in with us. No one knew we were praying, it looked as though we were just chatting. We shared our concerns and hopes for the journey. That was the only time we had any 'formal' prayer although I'm sure we all continued to pray throughout the journey. Before we moved off again a German trucker took a group photo of us all. At one point he had 30 cameras at his feet! We all wanted a memento.

We had been granted special permission to travel on Sundays and we intended getting to the Tunnel du Frejus before 2200hrs when the normal HGV's would start rolling. We wanted to miss the rush.

The journey across France was short lived and as we travelled further south we could see the Alps in the distance. It was getting dark and all the convoy had put on their headlights. We dashed on ahead to speak to the Tunnel Police and as we looked back at the convoy the sight was amazing, large sweeping open roads that were taken up by a mile long trail of wagons. It was a sight I'll never forget. The photos just don't do it justice, you would find it hard to appreciate, they're just lorries. The lights snaked their way towards the tunnel. The Tunnel Police sent us to a small car park where we stayed for a few minutes and then one by one we were sent through with large gaps between us, as a safety precaution. Eventually after a six mile drive through the tunnel we arrived in Italy at 2200hrs on the Sunday.

The Italian Passage

Monday 26th April 99

The Italian Embassy had arranged for us to have free passage through the country's toll roads. This was very good of them but it proved to be more trouble than it was worth! When a HGV is carrying goods it has to have a manifest. Each vehicle also had a copy of the letter from the Italian Embassy. On arrival at your toll gate you would normally slow down and take a ticket as you pass, producing the ticket at your destination and pay the bill. What happened here was the first vehicle stopped and had to show the letter, the toll booth operator took the registration of the vehicle and the copy and sent them on. It wasn't until about the third or fourth wagon that we realized the drivers were having to part with their letters at the toll booth, but when we got to the pay booth we needed to show them again! We lost 45 minutes on the first toll road and there were about eight or ten more to go! John managed to get more copies photographed and we set off again. John had come to deal with the administration side of things and spent most of the journey jumping in and out of the vehicle at every toll gate, at every fuel stop and on every occasion when we were met by 'red tape'. He became so tired I ended up driving for him on more than one occasion. There were no time restrictions on private car drivers. Because we thought we were getting behind schedule we moved on again. Travelling at speed we dashed across the Italian countryside while I tried to sleep in the back. I woke up on a service area. I could hear one of our party bartering with an Italian guy who was selling a cam-corder. Eventually he clenched a deal and money was exchanged for the goods. As we moved off he tried to open the bag only to discover the zip had been glued with super glue! So with a little help from a pen knife the bag was slit open only to find two bags of Italian salt! Stung!

We eventually arrived in Ancona at 1145hrs and headed straight to the port office. We were told by the officials that our ferry booking was o.k, but that the port of Bari was closed due to military activity. This was confirmed by other truckers traveling north. The police were turning vehicles around and sending them back even though they had tickets!

Our original plan had been to cross with eight wagons from Ancona and seven from Bari. Of the seven four were to travel at night and three to travel the next day. Because of the distance from Ancona, we planned to all arrive in Albania within a few hours of each other. The port was heaving and everyone wanted to get on the ferry.

There was another problem. We could only get one-way tickets and even though we had return tickets it was a free for all at the other side getting out! We were told we could be held up getting out of the port from Albania by ten days! This really put a dampener on our spirits. We had roughed it for three days, we were tired out, and to be told that we could not take our wagons across and also be delayed coming home was unbelievable.

We held a meeting in the middle of the port reception area in front of the ticket office. Some men were worried that they would lose their jobs if they were delayed too long. We could not face the prospect of returning to Urmston with the wagons. We were at an all time low. Then Dr Irvin spoke of our reasons for being on the convoy. This is what he said. "I've got something in my heart. I wanted to support you on the way here and I think I've done that now. But I've got something else in my heart, something deep inside that I want to do for these people. I know you guys have totally knackered yourselves for weeks. You have totally knackered yourselves, and why? Because you have a hope, that's the word, hope, to do something which is going to help people who are suffering like you have never seen suffering before. That's your hope isn't it? Isn't that the reason you're here? I'm telling you, if you had a chance to make this journey and didn't do it, you would turn in your grave begrudging 'till your last day. You have got the hope to help. That's why you're here. That's why you're here, isn't it? I mean,

for goodness sake, if you don't do this now you will have lost everything you have worked for." Everyone applauded him and many were reduced to tears.

John, Colin, and Philip somehow managed to get inside the booking office which was on the other side of the counter. They spent ages trying to sort out tickets. The best they could come up with was, to leave three vehicles on the dockside. We decided that those whose vehicles were to be left in Ancona, would continue the journey with us. There would be plenty to do when we got there. There were still four lads who were worried about their jobs and had decided to go home, so we emptied the Transit van and they went home the next morning in that. Eventually we got three extra places, making a total of eleven from Ancona and were assured of three places from Bari the next day. This was the best we could do. Three professional drivers volunteered to go to Bari.

The port of Ancona was very disorganized. Vehicles were approaching the ferry boat from all angles. They had to be reversed on to the cargo deck. Many drivers were worried about reversing a 40ft trailer into the boat so Colin loaded most of them.

No one seemed to be calling vehicles on, so I drove forward in the people carrier only to be stopped and waved to one side. By this time all the foot passengers were aboard. There was just me and a few other private cars. One by one the cars were waved on. I joined the queue only to be rejected again. This happened three or four times and I was getting rather anxious. Philip was waiting. He stood with one foot on the gangplank and one foot on the dock. It turned out that the port officials thought that my vehicle was a van and not a car. It was full of the foot passengers' personal belongings and they could not see the seats! Eventually we were all aboard and met in the passport area on the boat.

"Who's got the black bag?" someone asked. The bag contained thousands of pounds of charity money. Suddenly there was a panic. John jumped ship! He ran off the boat back to the dock side where he had had it last. Just then Gareth appeared with it. John had given the bag to him for safe keeping and in all the rush had forgotten.

The Adriatic Crossing

The ship was the M/N Sansovino. There seemed a cold atmosphere on board. Few people smiled. There were no children on the ship, nearly all the passengers were men. There was a group of young men, some aid workers but by far the large majority were going to fight with the KLA.

We handed in our passports and were given our keys to our cabins. Philip and I were to share a cabin. The room was small with a link door into the next cabin. Our cabin had a bunk bed and a small bathroom with a shower, toilet and wash hand basin. The crossing was to take 22 hrs. We had a shower and then went to get a meal. The staff in the restaurant were very pleasant and we managed to explain to them why there were so many drivers with one group. Most aid convoys have three or four wagons. We weren't to know it but this short friendship paid off the next day!

Tuesday 27th April 99 08-00hrs

Woke up early! Stayed in bed until about 10am then had some pastries and coffee for breakfast. The Albanian coast could be seen in the distance. As the shoreline grew closer, we could see tall cranes and large ships. Just out to sea was a small rusty frigate. We joked "That's the Albanian Navy". Many a true word is said in jest.

As we got nearer it became increasingly obvious that this port had not worked for a number of years. Rusty old ships were moored up and had not moved for ages. The cranes looked as though they were frozen to the skyline. The atmosphere from earlier had still not gone. If anything, it was getting even more tense. We were nervous and apprehensive, everybody looked so serious. One man said "I've never been to a dock area where there was nothing working or moving. It is so quiet and a bit scary". That was how we all felt, I'm sure. As we approached the port we soon realized that if we were delayed on the dock we wouldn't have any food. So we arranged with the cook, who we had befriended earlier, to have 60 ham and cheese sandwiches made at discount price. Everyone else was paying over the odds! While we were waiting to disembark, a small boy, called Heir, came on to the ship. He started to pick up litter and helped one of the staff tidy up for the return journey. He was a character and he mingled with the truckers mischievously. Ian, the video man caught him on video. This fascinated him. He was able to see himself on the playback facility. All the passengers had made their way down to the ferry deck, except us. John was having trouble with the Albanian passport and visa official. She was trying to charge us £1,200. import tax. Other groups were paying up because they were only small groups and it wasn't a lot of money, but our group was far greater and in any case we weren't going to pay import tax on humanitarian aid. Some disgruntled passengers came back up to find out what the delay was. Eventually the Italian Captain came down to see what was going on. He was furious with the Albanian staff and told us we should not pay import duty on humanitarian aid. This we knew. Eventually the woman in the office stormed out and someone else came in to the office. Everything was sorted out and we didn't pay.

The Hell Hole

As we drove off the ship we were directed to a small area with other wagons. It was a holding compound we nick named the 'Hell Hole'. It was about the size of two football pitches and had a large wall about 10ft high with a wire fence on top. We couldn't see out. There were two filthy, smelly, chemical toilets that had not been emptied for weeks. In fact you couldn't open the doors, let alone go in one! Men had been stuck in this 'Hell Hole' for days. There was a smell of stale urine where drivers had had to urinate on the floor. Some desperate folk had to defecate in a corner near the dock edge. Through the middle of the compound was a drain that ran out to sea. Within the gully was a small pipe from which ran 'clean' water! We could hear gunfire out side, and we 'd already heard of a person, two weeks earlier being shot while stealing soap from a wagon.

We were met at the dock by Geoff M. I had not met Geoff before. He was the main instigator of the Urmston convoy. He was with an Albanian contact from one of the groups working with refugees, a guy called Angel. There had also been another man called Bob J, an American who used to live in England but was now lecturing in theology in Durres. Bob had to go on somewhere so I didn't meet him until later. Those who had met him only spoke good of him "That preacher guy who bought us a beer", I heard one driver say.

There was a problem with the documentation. We were told we needed the registration documents but we did not have them as we did not own the vehicles. The day passed by and we still had no registration documents and it became obvious we were going to have to spend the night in this "Hell Hole." We were all feeling low and I'm sure most of us would have admitted to being frightened.

The port ran two ferries a day. The evening ferry was just about to depart. Colin realising our predicament, walked straight on to the boarding ramp, right past passport control and on to the ship. He emerged 30 minutes later with three crates of beer and two plastic bags full of ham and cheese sandwiches. We had a great evening that night, sharing our beer and sandwiches with some other truckers who found themselves in the same situation. We met a Danish driver, built like Geoff Capes who insisted on singing. No one argued with him! He was a real nice guy. He had two palm leaves fixed to the front of his cab and he explained they were like the palm leaves that were waved for Jesus- a sign of peace he said. "Are you a Christian?" I asked. "No" he said laughing. There were also two Italian drivers who joined us that night, they also were on a humanitarian aid mission. It was a night I'll never forget. After the beer had run dry one by one the truckers retired to their cabs. We decided to keep a watch through the night. Gunshots could still be heard and packs of dogs wandered around the compound. In fact next to us was an old bus which housed a litter of puppies- no RSPCA out here!

Wednesday 28th April 99 0500hrs

It was my turn on watch. I crawled out of the car, which was drenched with condensation, and Philip took my place. There was still the odd crack of gunfire but it sounded a good distance away. Suddenly in the quietness I heard a man shout out into the night. It startled me at first then I realized it was an Imam calling the Muslims to prayer. At around 7am a young teenager climbed on to the wall. He was carrying a rifle slung over his back and around his neck was a number of plastic mineral bottles held together by a length of string. As he landed he looked across towards me and started to walk in my direction. My other lookout was still much the worse for the drink and was dozing in an upright sitting position! I called to him and he awoke. The young lad walked past us, acknowledging our presence. He continued past and stopped in the middle of the compound where he then bent down and removed his necklace of bottles. One by one he filled them from the surface drain that ran through the yard, the same yard that everyone had been urinating in all day! After witnessing this we bought crates of water that were shrink wrapped and checked each seal before opening them. We were told that the locals

resealed the caps with a hot piece of metal. At 8am two older men came into the compound to 'tidy up'. That's a joke. The place was filthy. I learned later they were only after the empty aluminium cans. At 830am the ferry from Bari arrived with the other three wagons on board. Their journey had been just as eventful. Ronnie, Ray and John had had problems with the paper work in Bari. Ronnie the Scot, a real nice guy had a word with one of the officials and smooth talked John's vehicle on board. The official turned his back on them and waved them on. Although we came across lots of red tape we also experienced lots of goodwill.

Today Dr Irvin was to have met someone from Tirana. His lift had not arrived. I was talking, in a fashion, to a French Red Cross worker called Vincent. He had come to pick up a small group from the ferry. Vincent offered to take Irvin to Tirana. I helped Irvin with his bags and wished him God's blessing as he bravely left our party. Off he went in a car with a group of people he had never met before. That was the last time we saw the Doc until our reunion back home some weeks later. It was 12 noon and we were still not moving. Problems again with the paperwork. It was as though they were holding us up on purpose. We wondered if they were hoping for backhanders. We had experienced it on the boat. A cargo handler had refused to secure one of the wagons unless he was given a phone card. The driver gave him one that was empty! Following that we agreed we were not going to pay bribes with the charity money. Apparently they wanted the original log books of the vehicles, "They are hired vehicles" we told them but they wouldn't budge.

By now the British media had got involved. I'm not sure if Gareth had anything to do with it but we were suddenly being interviewed by Good Morning Television, GMTV. The convoy was large and had blocked up the port and another ferry was due in soon.

Eventually John, Geoff and Angel managed to get the log books faxed across from Salford Van Hire and they reluctantly let us out at 1730hrs. Unfortunately we had to leave the Toyota, our home for the week, on the dock side. We quickly disabled it and took the main fuses with us. Hurriedly we emptied the vehicle and concealed ourselves in the sleeping compartments of the HGV's.

Welcome to Albania!

There was no tourist industry, that was apparent from the inside of the dock compound, not even a welcome sign. Having been there now I know why. In fact I had an inkling earlier, when we were in the dock. A small boy came round selling red pennants with black tassels around the edge. He wouldn't accept Leck, his own currency, only Dollars. He was not daft. Poor, definitely, but not daft. I bought one. I have since discovered it was the pennant of the Kosovo Liberation Army. I'm glad we didn't meet any Serbs! As we left through the gates, we saw in front of us a small shanty type building with a few chairs outside, where some shady looking characters were sitting drinking beer from the bottle. The contrast in the types of people was eye-catching. One minute there would be the poorest of the poor children, boys and girls running towards us in virtually their underwear, and then there was the businessman, Mafioso type guy, smartly dressed with a couple of younger men with guns tucked in their trouser belts. The officials were scruffily dressed. The police were nothing like the British police. In fact I have since learnt that the police are recruited from the villages because they are not educated and they often take orders from the Mafia. They take bribes and see it as part of their pay, as do most officials!

As we carried on down the pot-holed dirt track, the main road out of the port, clouds of dust billowed out from the wagons in front of us. One driver described it in one word, 'Armageddon'. Young children with matted hair were begging, running alongside the convoy. We had lots of bags of crisps and bars of chocolate which we threw from the vehicles. There were packs of mangy dogs that were little more than skin and bone. A man who looked in his fifties but was probably only about thirty five, was holding a tightly swaddled baby in his arms. He also bent down scratching in the dirt to pick up a chocolate bar.

If we'd have stopped it would have been difficult because whenever we stopped we blocked the roads and that would have drawn the attention of any official looking for a backhander. About a mile down the road we were stopped by a police officer at a checkpoint. Colin, who was leading the convoy, jumped out of his passenger seat and waltzed over to him. He exchanged a few words with him and the officer waved us on. Colin stayed with him laughing and joking with him until we were all through. I was in the vehicle bringing up the rear. By this time Colin had the policeman's gun in his hand and was pointing it at us, laughingly! After the convoy had passed he climbed into our cab and a cloud of dust entered with him.

To the right, between us and the coast, could be seen row upon row of dark green frame tents with groups of families just milling around. The whole set up was very regimented and structured. This we learned was an Italian run refugee camp. There were military jeeps driving in and out. We were very hot and cramped in the vehicle as it swayed and dropped from side to side. We travelled along the road out of town, if it could be called a road.

After the fall of Communism the country was left in rack and ruin. Everything that was under construction ceased. All services slowly ran out of funding and ground to a halt. The country was bankrupt and the only way the poor could make money was to scrounge around for scrap metal. Consequently all grid covers and manhole covers had been stolen. There were holes three feet in diameter dropping deeply down into the old sewers beneath. At the sides of the roads were large open ditches which were dug to replace the old sewage system, obviously now in use judging by the pungent smell.

Across, to the side of the road, was a flat piece of land about the size of four football pitches. covered with litter, rubbish and piles of rubble. Although we didn't see them it must have been infested with rats and vermin. A breeze blew across the tip scattering dust and litter over the road.

There was no regular structure of street-lined buildings. Every now and then, set back from the road, were dwellings half built or half falling down, with scaffolding made from wooden timbers precariously attached to their walls. Families pooled what little money they had to buy bricks and mortar and when they ran out of materials the work came to a standstill. Every quarter of a mile or so were large flat mushroom-shaped concrete structures. These were bomb shelters from the Communist era. Originally they had been covered with sheets of steel, but many were now bare concrete.

We were nearly at our destination for the night. We turned right into a side road. On the corner was a bomb shelter from which emerged a small group of children. Out came the crisps and chocolate again. We travelled down this road to a large vehicle compound where we pulled over to the side of the road while Geoff and John spoke to the man on the gate. Geoff had organized this in advance but there was a slight hold up.

We were able get out of the cabs at this point and stretch our legs. The children looked on in amusement. By gesticulating we were able to find out if they were Albanian or Kosovar. Some were in fact from Greece. Eventually the large gate was opened by a middle-aged man with a rifle slung over his back. He pulled, then pushed the gate, it obviously needed attention. Across the yard there was a younger man also with a rifle. He was directing the wagons (Kammions) into the corner of the yard. The yard was similar to the port compound. It had an eight foot wall and perimeter fence. On one of the four sides there was a long building stretching the full length. This had a number of small rooms one of which had sliding doors and was used as a garage for an old Mercedes car. Next to this was the toilet, literally a filthy hole in the floor which was encrusted with excrement.

On a brighter note the Albanians that were around were very pleasant. The younger man was the son of the man who owned the compound. He was called Indred and he had a couple of friends from Kosovo, Betim and Arrsan.

Indred showed us around his compound. In one corner, was a house under construction. It was three storeys high and, like the other houses, was being built by his family and his uncles. Construction was basic but with imagination you could see it on a postcard on some tourist leaflet. I wondered if it would ever get finished.

We were intrigued with the guns and rifles. Indred told us that most young men carried a gun and at night time they would get drunk and shoot them off into the night sky. Downstairs in the living room the wall had no plaster, you could see the breeze block construction and the salt crystals coming out of the large blue rectangles. By the light of 60 watt bulb we played 'ping pong' with the older man. "Let him win" one of the drivers advised "he's got the gun!"

After gaining their friendship Gareth spoke to Arrsan who gave a moving interview that later went out over the air on our local radio station. Arrsan was a 21 year old Kosovar. He stood tall and smart unlike most of the men of that region. He wore army boots and khaki trousers with plain army style waistcoat, and round his neck was tied a small red and white handkerchief. Arrsan had been in the K.L.A. He had been shot twice in the arms and as a result spent three months in hospital. He was near to tears as he told us his story. He was very pessimistic and could not see an end to the fighting.

"They are doing too much, it's not just a war" he was referring to the atrocities we had all heard about in the news reports.

While we were talking and getting to know the locals Geoff and John went to find a hotel. We had lost the people carrier and the transit van and also three wagons, so we were now in a position where there were more men than beds.

Geoff eventually came back in a minibus with a driver who had agreed to transport us around for the next few days. It was worth his time. The minibus took some of the drivers to the hotel and returned for more. It had started to become dark so we decided to start walking to the hotel. It seemed a good idea at the time but our bags were heavy and there was an open sewer alongside the road. Cars would swerve and dodge the holes and oncoming traffic, there was dust everywhere. Then out from the dust came Bob Johnson in his car. He had come to give us a lift to the hotel but there were too many of us so he took our bags and we walked on to the hotel.

The hotel was on the sea front and you could see the docks in the distance. The building was almost finished, in fact the first day of our visit saw the completion of the tiled dining area. We were given a set of keys and shown upstairs.

There were four en-suite rooms and a large landing with two bed settees. The rooms were well equipped and clean. Those drivers who were going back to the compound after the meal had use of the showers first. After changing, we went down for a meal. Ham sandwiches, crisps and chocolate were not on the menu, thank goodness. Fish or beef was the only option. What they call beef is open for debate. We decided it was probably horse or donkey. It certainly was not cow! It was a very pale

white meat which tasted reasonably well with chips. On this first occasion I decided to have fish.

While we were waiting for our meal we bought some beers. The Albanians are mainly secular and don't hold fast to Muslim ideas. However one driver was pulled up by a local for eating bread with one hand and drinking beer at the same time. I'm still unsure of the reasoning behind this but anyway, Philip went over and apologized for our ignorance. We didn't have any further problems with traditions.

After the meal Phil and I decided to retire. I left the dining room ahead of him and as I stepped out on to the veranda, I felt a 'whistle' pass my ear, I then heard automatic gunfire. I froze. I have never been shot at before and I didn't know whether to drop to the floor or run. Phil, who was following me, said he saw the tracer shoot through the air. It may have been yards away but it was too near for my liking!

Later on, one of the drivers wanted to get some cigarettes from the 'shop', a small hut with a table outside which looked like a 'black market' car boot! The owner stopped him and said it was too dangerous to go out at night on his own, so he sent him with an escort who was carrying a gun. I later learned that when in Albania your host is responsible for your safety. You are safe while walking with your host but not on your own.

The Stevenson Centre

Thursday 29th April 99

This morning we had to be up and ready for 6-30am. After a quick wash we went downstairs and on to the veranda which opened on to the beach. There was no breakfast as it was too early. We didn't walk very far down the beach, it was strewn with litter and rubbish. The locals used it as a tip. The smell wasn't pleasant either.

We were taken back to the compound to meet the others and then on again by minibus to a warehouse. This was a warehouse that supplied a number of camps, the Stevenson Centre being one of them. Some of the drivers wanted to weigh up the access into the warehouse. As we trundled along the dusty road we crossed a railway crossing that didn't look as though it had been used for years. The steel tracks lay high up on the broken road surface. Vehicles had to slow right down and cross the steel tracks crossing at right angles to the lines. Otherwise they risked ripping their tyres. One of our drivers grounded on this crossing and damaged the front legs of his trailer. This was a very congested area where four roads and the railways converged. As we progressed slowly onward, we could see people sitting and standing at the side of the road. They had brought their wares into town and were trading them to whoever they could get to look at them.

Before we had unloaded any of our aid we could see piles of clothes set out at the side of the road, obviously aid acquired through the black market. The corruption seemed everywhere. Indrid had told me that even the teachers took bribes for their pupils to pass an exam. If you don't pay, you don't pass! This was also confirmed by Bob J.

The warehouse was right in the middle of town which surprised me, I don't know what I expected. I suppose I'd expected it to be out of town, I don't know why. We slowed down and our escort showed us a large overhang from a nearby building. We had to turn into a very narrow alleyway which again was full of pot holes. As we drove down this short alley we were aware of people looking at us from tatty windows. These were the native Albanians. When we emerged from the alleyway we were at the sidings of a large railway network. Like the docks, it too had not been used for years and there were carriages left open to the elements. The railway was on our left and to our right was an old railway warehouse. This was the warehouse where we had to deliver our goods. It was about 40 meters long with a shuttered door at each end. We walked into the building, which was derelict, and in any other country would probably have been condemned, but now it had found a use again. At one end of the building an elderly man was sitting in a fork lift truck loaded with a pile of boxes which seemed to be scrambling towards the skylight, the pile teetering on the verge of collapse. There were a few locals who had followed the van from the alley wondering what these funny westerners had come for. We left the warehouse on foot and walked on. Next door was a row of shanty type houses. These were the homes of the Albanians. They had thrown bare wires over the overhead power lines and were running their lighting from this source. The power goes off regularly and so does the water supply. Those who are fortunate to work only do so for a few hours a day so everything stops when they go home ,even the water!

Our guide told us that these poor people had found some Kosovo refugees in the train carriages and took them into their own homes. They shared what they had with them. This apparently is a tradition that goes back hundreds of years. I must admit it puts us to shame. As we passed these homes and rounded the corner we could see a large modern clean looking building. The Stevenson Centre. This was a disused technical college. In front was a court yard which was filled with activity, children on one side lining up in crocodile fashion, and on the other, a large water tanker that had just arrived. Adjacent was a large frame tent that was used as a doctor's surgery. The college building was five storeys high and

was the home of the Kosovo refugees. We mulled around in the yard while Geoff went to talk to someone. I spoke to a man who was a teacher back home in Kosovo. He told me in broken English, that he was taking the children to a local school for an hour or two. He said "We are only playing at school really, we try to keep the children in some sort of routine". The children trotted off and we went inside.

We had our cameras but there was no way we could take pictures of these people; respectable men and women reduced to sitting on an old mattress sharing with 16 people to a room. An old man and woman sat crying together.

We were taken to the 'Kitchen'. On the floor, unwrapped, was a pile of bread about shoulder high. In the room, a few knives and not much else. I came out, I had to. Some of the lads went for a further look round but I'd seen enough. When they came out of the building those hard rough tough lads where changed men. Most could be seen holding back the tears.

This was supposed to be a good camp. We dreaded seeing the others. Not all of the drivers had travelled to the warehouse and camp that morning. Some had stayed with the lorries on the off chance that they might have to make a delivery. We left the camp and walked out into the main street, the route we had come in by. It was eight or nine o'clock and we had not eaten, so we went into a local cafe. Geoff negotiated with the owner and we all sat down much to the amusement of the four locals sitting near the window. The atmosphere was quiet and somber. How could we eat after witnessing such heartache? But needs must, we were going to be busy unloading trailers, so we needed the energy. The owner came with a sampler of soup which looked like porridge. It was a pasta based soup with goats cheese and olive oil, garnished with a sprig of Parsley. It was terrible, but we were hungry. When we had finished the soup, Geoff asked for the menu, "What do you want lads beef or fish?" he asked us. While we were eating, I glanced across the table to catch one of the men quietly crying into a napkin. What can you say? We all carried on eating.

As we left the cafe some of the lads were approached by a gypsy woman, who had a baby at her breast and was begging for food. Someone went back inside the cafe and came out with a couple of pieces of bread. We hung around for a few moments while one of the lads tried to talk to her. While we were waiting a man came down the street with a small barrow selling fish. The road was busy and the dust was blowing all over his fish. I was glad I'd had the fish yesterday, before seeing this. We returned to the compound in the mini bus. Some of the lads were still there, some had crossed our path and gone to the warehouse to off-load. Later they returned with just the unit, as the driver had maneuvered on to some soft ground and the unit's wheels started to spin. In his inexperience, he unhooked the trailer and came back for help. We all piled into the mini bus and went to retrieve the trailer. When we got there, the trailer had settled even more, and we could not get the unit underneath it. Then someone had the bright idea to dig the ground away, lowering the ground level just enough to get the unit back under the trailer. It took us an hour or so but eventually we freed it and returned to the hotel. Having seen the camp that morning and seen the clothes on the streets we wanted to make sure we delivered our aid directly to the camps whenever possible.

To the north of Durres was another town called Lezhe (pronounced 'lee sure'). Its population had doubled due to the influx of refugees. We were warned that we had to travel through 'bandit country' and we had already heard disturbing reports about hijackings and robbery. We could not get a military escort but we were told we would be safe so long as we kept together and drove during daylight hours. The lads did not fully trust this advice so we had a meeting. We decided not to go, but to deliver the goods to a nearer warehouse. Then one after another a small group of volunteers came forward. It was agreed that the next day a group would take some wagons to Lezhe. The rest would go with Bob and his wife Alyce to the camp at Shijak.

The Maranatha Camp

The Maranatha Camp had nothing to do with the Maranatha Community at home. This was the camp run by Bob's Evangelical college in Durres. The people back home knew it as the Britannia camp.

Friday 30th April 99

We met at the compound and separated into two groups as arranged. We were going to see the Maranatha camp. Alyce arrived and was to lead the way in her car. We climbed into the car and the minibus followed. Alyce talked to us along the way, pausing every now and then whilst she negotiated the pot holes and oncoming drivers. She talked of bandits and the Mafia, her main concern was that there were estimated to be 800,000 refugees still in hiding high up in the mountainous border regions. Were they suddenly to turn up, and they could, the aid workers wouldn't be ready for them. "How many are at your camp?" I asked. She said there were 200 but she was expecting a large number over the next few days. "How did you get involved?" I asked. Bob was a lecturer in theology at the college in Durres and when the refugees started to come in to Albania he sent his students out to work with the refugees. Then they were given the use of this old bakery. On their first visit to the building they were met by a large group of refugees, women and children but very few men. What did she think the refugees' needs were, I asked. Clean water was the first thing she mentioned. They had just spent £800 on a new filter system to purify the water. They needed translators. The big aid agencies were paying \$40 per day and they could not compete with that so it was hard to get interpreters. The journey was far from comfortable but at least it wasn't as far as the others were traveling. Eventually we arrived at a small village. Tucked away behind the buildings was an old bakery, stripped of everything but the tiles on the floor. There was a large high wire gate with a small lodge to the right. Ahead, across a 30ft forecourt was the main front door. On each side of the door was a newly planted bush. People were sitting on the veranda and on the grass verge that surrounded the building was a small groups of women and young girls who were talking. It was possible to drive the car right round the building. Alyce parked the car and Bob appeared from inside the lodge. He was expecting us at the camp but he didn't expect the articulated lorry that rolled in behind the mini bus - it was full of food, we didn't want it to go 'missing' from some warehouse. The unit with its 40ft trailer drove in as far as possible but its rear end stuck out into the road. The vehicle and the entrance were guarded by two men who strolled out of the lodge. The refugees were not allowed out without a pass. That was an Albanian rule not one of the camp's. The Albanians were not allowed in unless invited. There had been reports of Mafiosi gangs going into camps and kidnapping young girls for enforced prostitution.

When Bob saw the wagon and found out it was full of tinned food he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. We, in our naivety, had given him a big headache. If the local bandits or Mafiosi got to hear about all this aid they might try to steal it. He was going to have to pay for an armed guard to watch the place for a few days. It wasn't that they were after the food, he explained, but a lot of aid is packed in old boxes such as TV boxes and other commercial products, and this encourages a misguided jealousy amongst the locals. As we had already seen, the Albanian people were the poorest of the poor.

The building was basically two long rectangular halls with a central joining door and doors at each end. Whilst Bob was talking to the other camp helpers about what to do with the truck, Philip and I, along with some others were shown around by Alyce. We were taken back to the main door opposite the gate and from the bright sunshine we entered a long dark room. As we looked down to our right the floor was lined with mattresses, with just enough room to walk down the centre. On each mattress sat a family group. It was quite noticeable that there weren't many men about. Some of the women, particularly the old women, looked away. They appeared to be ashamed or embarrassed. I felt we should not be there intruding in their suffering and misery. I had my camera with me and desperately wanted to share their plight with those back home, but I could not bring myself to take a snap.

To our left was the same sight, mattress after mattress right up to the far end of the building. We were only there for one or two minutes but it left me with an image that will stay with me for life.

We walked on through another door into the next hall. In sharp contrast this room was empty, with the exception of a pile of rough cut timber that had just been dumped in the centre. There were two groups of men working, one group of Dutch men and other group of Germans. By this time Bob had joined us and he explained that these men had arranged, totally independently from each other, to come over and do some basic carpentry. He had been promised the timber, and they would bring their basic tools and provide the labour. When they arrived they realised they had a problem with the timber. They needed to cut it to standard sizes in order to make plaster board walls and shelving. "Then in answer to prayers a guy turns up with a circular saw bench". Bob was very subtle in the way he spoke and the way he shared his faith he certainly didn't come across as a Bible basher! He would chat and talk with us every now and then just witnessing by the odd word or phrase. He wasn't pushy, but once you'd met Bob you knew there was something about the man. His wife Alyce also had a calming unruffled way about her. I thought back to our journey in her car and to the way she had told us of the problems they had encountered with bandits and Mafiosi as though it was an everyday occurrence; in reality it probably was! The Dutch guys were busy at one end constructing a small group of rooms with shelves which were going to be for storage and the Germans had started to construct large timber frames on the floor in front of us. They were given the task of making room partitioning to divide the long hall into smaller units. To our left at the far end of the hall was an area that we had been given to stack our food. Unfortunately we couldn't get a stacker truck inside the building and we had to haul every single can out of the trailer.

Because of the distance we had to carry the food we formed a human chain. The kids looked on bemused. They had not seen such strange men before some with beards and long hair, some with short cropped hair and others covered with tattoos. In a show of bravado the men in the wagon would start passing the tins faster and faster until it reached the stage where we were throwing them to, or should I say, at each other. Eventually we had to stop or some one would have been hurt. Soon the older lads among the watchers though there weren't that many, joined in. They worked hard, and for that short time they seemed to be having fun. Fun was difficult to find in a place like this. This went on for a couple of hours. At one point we re-routed our chain and started to fill the shelves that the Dutch men had just finished. It must have felt good for them to see the fruits of their labour put to good use so quickly.

Eventually, after hours of hard graft we had emptied the long trailer and the rest of the day was spent talking, singing and playing with these lovely people from Kosovo. Three drivers had offered to go back to Ancona, in Italy, where we had had to leave three wagons on the dock. They were going to try and bring them across whenever they could catch a sailing. They left the camp with the artic and went back to Durres.

The women were apologetic, they could only offer us a cup of tea and a biscuit, but it was gratefully received. We chatted with our hands, with pen and paper and occasionally referring to my Albanian phrase book. We were told lots of stories by these people.

I spoke to Nezir Bytychi, an old looking man who in fact was only ten years my senior. He took my pen and wrote his name in a rough, child like hand, then wrote his age. I did likewise. I thumbed my way to the back of my diary where I found the maps and pointed to Manchester on the map of England. He smiled. "Manchester United", I said, and he sprang to life, "Manchester United, ah". Nezir was sat in a wheelchair, both his legs had been amputated and his hands had a number of fingers missing. We sat opposite each other and over a poorly orchestrated game of chess he told me of his family, his wife and five daughters.

Nezir was from Prizren. When the trouble started, he and his family were forced out of their home. He was put on a horse and cart and ordered out of the town. Eventually the cart failed and his wife and daughters carried him across the mountains into Albania. We had seen TV pictures of the sick being pulled along on plastic mats through the snow, but it seems so far removed on TV. There were lots of children in the camp. I spoke to one or two and within minutes I had a large group of kids around me. Two girls were playing 'pat a cake' so I joined in. Before long we were exchanging nursery rhymes. Although I was with these rough, tough truckin' guys, I threw caution to the wind and we danced 'ring-o-ring of roses'. No one said a word! The kids were great. At one point, when we were all in a circle holding hands, two Chinook helicopters flew overhead. Far above them were three NATO bombers flying inland towards Kosovo. The children stopped and pointed to the sky crying "Nato, Nato, hurrah" They clapped their hands and looked at me for approval. It was clearly obvious that the Kosovo people approved of the bombing.

There was one little fellow who had hounded me most of the day, he was an affectionate little lad of eight years old his name was Paytum pronounce Pie tom. He had big brown eyes and a very open face. These young children were desperate for affection and the contact of a fatherly figure. He came close to me and reached out his hand to stroke my beard, he smiled. Most men he had seen were clean shaven. I couldn't bring myself to ask him about his father, he certainly was not there. Philip was playing volley ball with the teenagers, mostly girls, although there were a few lads. Philip and three of the girls came over to me. One scratching ferociously at her arms. Her face was covered with spots. Phil and I looked at them and decided they were mosquito bites. She agreed. I got out some cream from my first aid bag. She showed us her legs. I stopped her she didn't have to show me any more. I gave her the full tube. You'd have thought I'd given her the world.

Alyce and I met up again, we were talking. She said that many of these young girls had been raped. She told us how a young woman had carried her dead husband for three days across the mountains because she could not leave him; of families woken in the night by Serb police and given minutes to get out, and families that had been deliberately split up and kicked out at gun point. A woman spoke through Anna, an interpreter, and told us of beatings by the police. These beatings got worse when the police heard of the NATO bombings. "They did not shoot us, but they beat us with rifles" she said. Asked by Anna if she would go back, she replied, "We hope. We hope". Alyce and I got talking about our faith and I suddenly realized we had seen nothing of the Muslim culture whilst in the camp or in fact anywhere else for that matter. She explained that they were mainly secular Muslims and did not practice their religion.

Things were winding down now and we were going to have to leave shortly. Suddenly there was a commotion around the mini-bus. It was then I remembered our surprise! The previous night, before we went back to the hotel, we had opened all the trailers and climbed deep inside to retrieve as many toys as we could. There were plenty of toys left for those who would eventually get delivery of the trailers. We wanted to be able to leave some toys with kids. We weren't sure whether it was legal or not and joked about 'Toy Running' in Albania! The children all dashed towards the bus. Inside, a few of the truckers were giving out the toys. It wasn't quite how we had planned to do it and I could see Bob and Alyce were unsure about it. But the chaos settled down and all the children got a gift. One of the drivers came across and gave Nezir a pack of cards. He obviously enjoyed his chess. Perhaps he would enjoy playing cards. He took the gift with a tear in his eye. It was a remarkable day. We were all tired out, both physically and emotionally.

Before we left we went back inside to see the Dutch and German workers. The Germans had now completed their task. The long hall had been transformed into three or four small dormitories and they were assembling the last of the three tier army style bunk beds. Bob said he hoped to move the refugees off the floor and into the beds by the next night. We reluctantly said our goodbyes, -

"Mirupafshim", and shouts of "Faleminderit" - thank you - came back the reply. The journey back to the compound was quiet.

The camp at Lezhe

The other trucks eventually returned from Lezhe, later than expected but all were safe. One of the drivers had stayed at the camp and came back later with George Rigley the camp organiser. The camp was a disused confectionery warehouse. When they got there they were taken to see a new born baby who had been named Freedom in the hope that he would soon be back in Kosovo a free person. The children back home had made greetings cards and sent messages and gifts to the children from Kosovo. The boxes were given out by John the Team leader. He spoke through an interpreter and explained how the whole community had come together to try and help them. The drivers that went to Lezhe were affected just as we were at Maranatha camp.

Ticket or Bust

1800hrs

Phil and I, and two drivers took two units back to Durres, to the Adriatica Ticket Office to secure our return tickets. It was a crazy set up with the office about a mile up the road from the port. We had to pass the port and slowly we ploughed our way through the large gathering outside the dock gates. Phil and I jumped down from trucks not knowing where we were going. With only a rough idea as to the direction of the office we ended up in large reception area. I enquired at the desk "Kamion?" "The Ticket Office?" I waved my passport. She pointed behind her and gestured that we went out and right round the building. I nodded and thanked her.

We left the building aware it was going dark and that we had a lot of money with us. The area was getting more secluded and the alleyways seemed to be closing in on us. There were groups of shady looking characters, but we could see other foreigners walking briskly in the same direction. As we turned the corner there was a small courtyard with a couple of small trees. There was a queue of people lined up against a wall. There was no door, but a raised window which was accessed by climbing up three or four wooden steps. The man at the front nodded to someone inside and stepped forward and onward down the step. He passed us unhappily muttering something in a foreign language. The queue consisted of about twenty people and was moving very slowly. We felt we were being watched all the time. Locals would stand on the corner for no other purpose than to watch us. Perhaps we were being paranoid! We were very aware that we had all the money for the return tickets.

Eventually we reached the front of the queue. Phil spoke "Eleven tickets for big lorries please". The clerk turned, at the same time taking our documents from Phil's hand. He seemed to ignore us and continued to talk to his colleagues in the office, then he went on the phone. Eventually he came back "OK" he said and produced a bill. "Sterling?" Phil enquired. We had put this money to one side for our return journey. " No no ,Dollars" the clerk replied. Reluctantly and cautiously we opened the bag just enough to see the bundles in the dim light which shone from the office. We didn't have enough dollars. "Leck"? Phil tried. "Ah" came the reply, we assumed that was a no! "Master card" he said. Phil looked at me. I had increased my limit to £3.500 before we left, but this would no way cover the cost. We shook our heads. I opened my phrase book "Where is the Bank?" -Ku este banka me e aferteh- . He pointed to his watch and gestured that it was closed. We came away empty handed and anxious that we couldn't change our money.

We found the two drivers who had stayed with the trucks. They'll pinch anything round here! We retraced our tracks. It was dark by now and hundreds of foot passengers were massed outside the gates of the port all trying to get into the tiny little passport office. The wagon edged its way through. We prayed that we didn't hurt any one. When we returned we explained the story and Geoff said he'd sort it out the next morning. Then we realized it was Saturday, would they be open? Tomorrow we were to take the last of the aid to another warehouse that Bob had managed to acquire while we were at the Maranatha camp.

Saturday 1st May 99

We took the wagons into town, driving past the first warehouse and on to another area of the town. I am unable to name the roads as the Albanians don't seem to have street names and there were very few road signs. On arrival we were met by Alyce and some European friends. Again we could not get the vehicles as near as we would have liked. With the aid of a small hydraulic pallet mover we were able to unload the boxes on to pallets. Then we would push the re-stacked pallet up to the small door that opened in to the warehouse. We discovered that one of these pallets was too big and wouldn't go

through the door, so we had to unload it again! We threw that pallet to one side. Whilst we were unloading three men came over and said Bob had said they could have some boxes for some Kosovans up the road. Bob was not there Alyce asked who they were and they said they were friends of Bobs. Alyce didn't know them and told them to come back in an hour when Bob was back. They went away and never came back! There was a sense that we were nearing our time to go home and the lads were hurrying things up again. The nonsense started again throwing boxes faster and faster. It was hard work. Alyce had slipped out unnoticed and returned with some bottles of mineral water and some cheese sandwiches. We stopped for a few minutes to eat. Two local women came over to me beckoning for something out of the trailer. One of them was Albanian and the other Kosovan. We explained, through one of Alyce's friends, that the aid was to be sorted and distributed fairly. Bob and Alyce told us later that many Albanians, poor as they were, had taken Kosovans in, and they intended to give some of the aid to them as well. We talked to the Kosovan women and without the aid of an interpreter she mimed her story. All the men in her village, including her husband, had been rounded up and taken into a house where the soldiers shot them. All the elderly men had had an ear cut off and the only males left unharmed were the very young.

Eventually we finished unloading and made our way back to the hotel. While we had been unloading at Bob's warehouse John and Geoff had gone to see if they could get some currency changed into dollars. The bank was closed. Bob said the only way we were going to change money would be through a money dealer, but they charged higher rates. He made a few phone calls from the hotel and gave John and Geoff instructions for the next day. They had to go to a certain bar and tell the bar tender he had sent them. It sounded like a script from an old fifties film. They would have to show the money to the guy behind the counter first. He would make a call and the money men would come in and make a deal. By this time everyone was getting anxious about getting our return tickets. We had had contact with Linda in England and she knew about our predicament.

Sunday 2nd May 99

Next morning Geoff and John settled our account with the hotel owner and we shook hands and said our goodbyes to his staff. With our bags and sleeping bags, we piled into the mini bus for the last trip to the compound.

When we tried to leave the lorry compound the gate man wouldn't let us out without paying. We thought this had been settled in advance and hadn't given it a second thought. Throughout the week the gate man had let individual cabs in and out, but now he was, understandably, very reluctant to let us all out at once. Someone paid him and we parted on good terms.

We were back in convoy once again. We hadn't travelled in true convoy since we arrived and it was good to be going home. The children were out again, they always seemed to know when we were on the move. We passed the Italian refugee camp with all its tents. As we approached the docks there was a straight section of road that ran alongside the railway line. We went through the checkpoint where Colin had pointed the policeman's gun at us and parked up. There was no sense in going any nearer to the gates at this point as we still didn't have any tickets. It was a hot dry day and as we pulled up a small group of gypsy children came begging. We gave them what we had which was not much by now. Some of the men had locked their vehicles and gone up to the gates where there was a small bar. John and Geoff had gone to sort out the money and the tickets. I was sitting in the cab with Phil. The beggars had gone, all but a little soul of eight years carrying a tightly swaddled baby. She came to the side of the cab. She didn't knock but just stood there. She had big brown eyes and filthy matted hair. My heart went out to her and I wanted to bring her home. I wanted to cuddle her and hold her. I opened the door and asked Phil if he had any food or sweets left. "She's got a baby, it must be starving" I said to Phil. "If it's hungry, it'll be crying", he said. I looked again and the baby was motionless. I beckoned to her to come close. I stretched out my hand and touched the baby. It was cold I flicked its eyelashes it

did not move. I tried to put my little finger in it's mouth it was rigid. The child was dead, pulseless. The girl looked me in the eye and ran off with the baby. I was in shock, and so was Phil. We are both medical people and witness death routinely, but this hit us hard. At first I wasn't sure if she knew the baby was dead but then I realized this little girl had been using the baby as a begging ploy. My first reaction was revulsion but as I thought about it I felt great pity for this little girl.

The day dragged on, and by the afternoon hundreds of foot passengers had arrived for the evening ferry. We had been taking it in turns to watch the vehicles. Not only from a security point of view but we had been told that many people were smuggling themselves on to the ferry in and under the trailers, some even arched themselves over the wheels under the wheel arches. Some of the men had found a family just behind some rocks not far from us. They had not been begging. In conversation they found that they were Kosovans and that they were waiting for some of their relatives to come and take them across on the ferry. The children were given some chocolate and some clean mineral water. Happily they were seen later on the ferry.

When the ferry arrived in the dock it was carrying masses of military equipment. Many NATO forces came off the boat. Germans, Americans, Dutch, Danish, Italians, French and the Brits. The equipment was amazing! Field hospitals, bridges, and heavy army machinery. They were obviously getting ready for ground troops. The politicians weren't saying anything at this time.

About 5pm. John and Geoff returned having exchanged the money. They told us that the bar was just as you would imagine in the films. Geoff had put his bag on the bar and spoke to the barman who then made a phone call. Shortly after, two men came in. Both were well dressed. One obviously carrying a gun under his jacket. They came over and shook hands. Geoff bought the beers and they sat down. Geoff explained he needed dollars. The money changer placed his brief case on the table and got out his calculator. He made some calculations and after a bit of haggling, a price was agreed. They had the dollars.

Now they had the money all they needed were 11 lorry tickets and one ticket for the people carrier, and about 15 foot passenger tickets! John and Geoff certainly had their work cut out, especially with the ticket office so far away. It was getting later and later and every one was on edge. There were Mafiosi walking around with guns. There were people every where. We tried to stay as one but it was difficult to keep together. John had to collect all the passports in order to obtain the tickets. Then we had to take the passports and exit visas personally to the passport office to be approved and stamped. Then he had to go to the Adriatica Ticket Office to get the tickets.

There were minor problems with the paperwork and John was flying up and down from port to ticket office. On one occasion he was so desperate he flagged down a passer-by and asked him to take him to the ticket office and back. The guy obliged and received a payment for his services. Eventually we were allowed to bring the lorries on to the dock. One by one the vehicles made their way through the gate stopping to be checked again.

This was great, but I still had not got my ticket for the Toyota. John was up to the eyes with it all. I tried to talk to the guard on the gate but he wasn't having any of it. I kept badgering him. "I need to get the car out of customs", I kept repeating. Eventually he got fed up with me and opened the gate. I squeezed through. At last I was on the right side of the fence, but I still had not got the car or a ticket. As I walked over to where I'd left the car, my heart sank. The customs office was shut, it was only normally open for incoming ferries. By now they had closed up for the night. Well, the car was still there. I unlocked it and replaced the fuses that we had removed to immobilize it. I climbed in and it started straight away. I drove over to the far side of the dock where the trucks had gone. Phil appeared as a foot passenger with some of the other drivers. The vehicles started rolling on. First all the heavies, then the vans. I thought I would follow the last of our trucks but I was stopped and sent back to wait. I pointed to the blue cross, the Humanitarian Aid symbol that we all displayed on our vehicles and then to

our lorries. "I'm with them", I insisted to no avail. Then the rest of the lorries, vans and cars were let on. I was literally the last vehicle on the dock, then at the last minute, they let me on. I was frightened of being left on my own. What was reassuring was that Phil, again, was standing on the gangway ready to jump ship should I not have made it. Having parked the car in the bowels of the ship I had to carry my bags up to the passport office.

It was 23-20hrs and we were on M/N PALLADIO heading towards Italy. I wasn't that impressed with Italy on the way out here but I sure was looking forward to getting back there! As I arrived at the passport office John and Phil were handing out keys to the cabins. I handed my passport in and we went to our cabin. Our priority was a good wash or shower. But to be honest, I just crashed out on the bed. Then after 15 minutes or so Phil said we'd better go down to the restaurant. By the time we found it, it was locked. We went back and had our showers then we went to find the bar.

Phil was still minding the money so we went through the 'accounts' with John and Geoff. It was then that John told us that they had gone through all the hassle of changing sterling into dollars for nothing. Linda had paid for the tickets by credit card in England! Communication in Albania was very difficult. The mobiles wouldn't work and phones were hard to find. Linda had been unable to contact us. After a couple of beers I wanted my bed. Having gone through the accounts we took the money back to our cabin and Phil returned to the bar. The ferry crossing was shorter on the way back, because we were sailing to Bari. I wrote up my diary and fell asleep only to be awakened by Phil some time later!

Monday 3rd May 99

"Attention! Attention!" The loud speaker shrieked out. Was that the time all ready? I didn't feel I'd been asleep. We washed and dressed, then went to grab some food. Before we knew it ,it was time to disembark.

Homeward Bound

We collected our passports and returned to our vehicles. Gareth, the reporter who was traveling at Piccadilly Radio's expense was to leave us now. We said our goodbyes and he made his way to the airport. Everything was going smoothly, and all the lorries were off the ferry. But we weren't moving. By this time Phil and John were in the car with me. We drove to the front, a port official was talking to a driver. "What's the problem?" we asked. We followed the official into the customs office which was part of the dock police station. The man in the office spoke good English and explained we had not paid for our tickets. We had no receipts because it had been paid for over the phone by credit card, we explained. After about an hour they finally satisfied themselves that we had in fact paid and let us out.

The journey across Europe had used up a lot of our documentation and we realized we would need fresh copies for our return. I boldly asked the police officer in the room if I could make some copies, "Many copies", I said. He agreed. I borrowed his staple gun. It was the only gun I had the nerve to touch all week! When I finished I offered to pay him but he shook his head "Humanitarian Aid" he said and smiled.

It was 10am what else could go wrong? We started to weave our way out of the port when we were stopped yet again by a policeman who was checking for illegal immigrants. This didn't take long and we were soon on the open road heading north up the east coast of Italy.

The three drivers that had returned to bring the three trailers back had run in to trouble. On return they found their vehicles impounded. The customs had towed them away to a lockup facility and demanded they pay a release fee. The drivers had been in touch with Linda in England and she was to sort it out. Meanwhile the lads had nowhere to sleep, so she booked them in at a hotel.

After looking at the map we in the support car decided to rendezvous with them at the hotel. We sped on in front of the convoy having arranged to meet them at a service area further north. They would be due a break shortly.

As we drove through the town of Ancona groups of people were walking and waving large flags. Lots of small groups were converging on the town square. We carried on up the hill which overlooked the dock and Adriatic sea, stopping at the top where the road came to a halt. This was the car park of the luxurious hotel where the lads were staying. They met us at the front door and took us into a very large palatial reception area that looked on to the port below.

As I mentioned previously we came across a lot of goodwill, and Colin told us of how, when the staff found out that they were on a humanitarian mission to Albania, they had brought them a bottle of champagne, on the house, to have with their meal.

There was by now a large gathering in the town centre and I went to look from the vantage point of the hotel car park. There were hundreds of young men rallying with flags and drums. They had met to go over to fight for the KLA. It was encouraging but at the same time unnerving to see this sight. I wasn't sure about the situation and I wasn't happy. Mothers, wives, girl friends walked along the pavement as they marched up the road to the port. The beating of the drum quietened as they turned behind a large building.

Mike, one of the driver mechanics, who happened to be traveling with us, decided he would stay with the three lads in case of any breakdowns or illness. His kit was in a lorry heading north but that did not bother him. I lent him my sleeping bag and John gave out some cash for expenses. We finished our drinks and wished them well. Unbeknown to us all at the time their plight was to continue for some

time. We left the hotel and made our way north. We had been there for about an hour and now we had to catch up with the convoy. The Previa was pretty nippy and we made good progress. The arrangement was to meet at the first Shell services after Parma. As we neared our estimated rendezvous point we had to come off at every service area because the 'Shell' signs weren't on view from the road. Eventually we found the convoy. They were ready to move off but had an extended break, while we grabbed something to eat and had a rest for a few minutes. We changed drivers and off we went again. We passed through the Alps, via the Tunnel du Frejus, and then on towards Lyon. We were approaching Lyon in the evening and the lead driver forgot to look for the next town sign.

Eleven articulated lorries and the support vehicle entered Lyon town centre in the rush hour, just as everybody was going home! As the traffic lights changed the convoy gradually got split up. We were at the rear of the convoy when we came across one of our wagons parked hazardously on the side of a busy city centre road. The vehicle had hit a small car. Fortunately nobody was injured. The young lady was reasonably composed considering. John exchanged details and we eventually moved on. The convoy was now well and truly split. The driver of the leading vehicle realizing the problem, pulled over before entering the next pay booth. As we were catching them up we passed yet another one of our lorries. The driver waved us on as it was an awkward place for us to stop. About a mile up the road we crossed the river Seine and stopped with the others. A quick count up and we had ten. We were one missing! We waited and waited. Eventually we decided to send the convoy on and we went back to look for the vehicle that had waved us on. We retraced the route to no avail. They'd vanished. They could have only gone two ways. The other route was south back to Italy. They wouldn't have gone that way! Time passed by and we decided to leave them to it. They had maps and a route to follow. The driver was experienced at continental driving and port procedures. The only thing was he didn't have a fuel card. We did some quick maths and decided they had enough fuel to get to Calais. After an exhausting drive across Italy and most of France we stopped for our required nine hour break. I was out like a light.

Tuesday 4th May 99

That morning Ray woke me up. "Hey Paul, put my arm in a sling will you", he said, waving his arm around! "Whats up", I ask? "Neil's bunk collapsed last night and he fell on top of me while I was asleep." There had been a lot of banter between Neil and Ray. Neil was a big lad and had taken it all in good spirit. I put Ray's arm in a sling and went along with the prank. When Neil eventually surfaced, he asked what had happened to Ray's arm. I told him he might have broken it when he fell on him last night. His face was a picture. I produced an accident form and asked him to sign it with effect that it was his fault. He went all serious "I'm not signing that", he said. "He'll sue me next." I shrugged my shoulders and walked away trying to hide my face. After about five minutes someone let him out of his misery. He was last seen chasing Ray across the car park. Ray couldn't run very far because he was laughing so much.

That morning we received a mobile phone call to say the other vehicle was at the dock in Calais. They had driven through the night! We were all intent on getting home as soon as possible. So we mounted up and hit the road. We eventually arrived at the docks in Calais but there was no sign of the missing wagon. The lads decided to get changed in the back of an empty trailer. Whilst they were in the back of the rig, they were unaware of the police helicopter that was hovering overhead. Within a few moments a police van rolled up with six armed police officers wanting to check the backs of our vehicles, they obviously thought we were carrying stowaways. We chatted to the police officers and eventually they left. Some of the lads went to a local warehouse to buy cheap booze before we boarded the ferry. At last we met up with the missing vehicle and they told us about the incident in Lyons. They had been involved in a minor road accident, but because John had the insurance documents and we had lost contact with them. They had been taken to the police station where they were kept for four hours. They eventually let them go and informed the docks police at Calais that they were en route and John was to show the documents before they could leave the country. This was to delay us yet again, just when we thought all was well. We were booked on for the next departure and John had to now sort this mess out

before we could leave. John arrived back just in time and we made a dash to the ferry departures. We made it. The boarding procedure ran like clockwork, slick, professional and efficient, in great contrast to the Italian and Albanian ports. The people here were smiling and animated. But there again this was a holiday port not a war zone! It was great to be on a British ship with people we could understand. The ferry was only a short jaunt to Dover and by the time we had been around the shop to buy a few gifts for the folks back home it was time to go down to the vehicle deck.

We arranged to meet up at the first services on the motorway to take on fuel. When we got there they wouldn't accept our fuel cards and I ended filling some of the vehicles on my own credit card! This had happened a few times in Europe but we didn't expect it in England. The idea was to stay in convoy and arrive in Manchester together, but the temptation of sleeping in our own beds was too great for some and the team was again split up, never to be together again.

One by one vehicles eventually arrived on the car park of the Trafford Centre. We had been in contact with the organizers and our families as we had travelled north and they were there waiting for us. It was 0200hrs on Wednesday 5th May, when we finally arrived back at the Britannia Inn, Urmston. We were all tired out, totally and utterly exhausted. All our families were there. We had so much to share. The greeting was very emotional. It was great to be home safely with our loved ones again. I was desperate to get to sleep. The local Indian restaurant had put on a spread and the local radio station were there to report on our return.

The next morning we had to go back to the Trafford Centre to take the vehicles and trailers back to the various hire companies.

The Final Push

That you might think was the end of something miraculous, but in fact the story carried on for the four men left in Italy. Linda spent some time in communication with the Italian Embassy. Eventually the Italian government apologised for impounding our vehicles and as an act of good faith gave the three vehicles free passage to Albania via the port at Brindisi. En route to the port they were stopped by the police and taken to a compound where they were surrounded by armed police. Customs officials stripped the trailers and drilled holes in the chassis and inserted fibre optic cameras in an attempt to find guns or drugs. Eventually they were released and were able to make their drop at Bob's warehouse some time later. They arrived home two weeks after the main convoy.

Even though we had closed the appeal, while we had been away we had received about twice the amount of aid again. This was mainly stored in a warehouse at Manchester Airport. Because of the cost of transportation it was decided to share the expense by networking with other charities. The aid was later distributed to various locations around the region.

Hope for the Future

When we were last with Bob and Alyce, Bob gave this last interview to Gareth.

Bob Johnson "We're in for the long haul. Realistically we think that people will be here for many months, maybe even years. My fear is that if the refugees' situation here is not resolved, we may find ourselves, much like the situation in Israel and Palestine, where you have a large indigent refugee population which then becomes very destabilizing. Our hope of course, and the hope of every Kosovar, is that the war will finish and they can go home to their villages, though they are burnt to the ground they will rebuild them. That is their hope, but of course that is a hopeless dream unless the war is over and some kind of resolution is brought to the conflict."

On 3rd June, President Slobodan Milosevic finally accepted peace terms presented by EU envoy President Martti Ahtisaari and Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin. With the authorisation of the United Nations, NATO forces deployed into Kosovo on the morning of 12th June to begin the task of restoring peace to the province. By 20th June 99, all Serb forces had left Kosovo.

An extract from a letter from Bob J .August, 1999.

Dear Friends, Greetings from Durrës, Albania. It would be an understatement to say that the past several months have been momentous. The War in Kosovo ended abruptly and we made hasty arrangements to accompany our Maranatha refugees to their homes. When we began the centre in late March we promised that we would care for them and take them home. Now it was time to deliver on the final part of the promise. We and our little group of 300 ex-refugees joined the great human river of 580,000 Kosovars making the long journey back. Many returned to homes completely destroyed. Many learned for the first time the fate of fathers, brothers, and uncles. Some were joyously found alive. Others were still missing or dead. Alyce and I, together with our Albanian and missionary co-workers, spent a week in Kosovo arriving 48 hours after the NATO troops had secured the capital, Pristina. One of the Maranatha refugee families whose home had amazingly been spared destruction hosted us. They said, "You took care of us for 3 months. Now we will take care you."

Bob and Alyce continued to be involved in a rebuilding program. All profits from the sale of this book went to the "Kosovar House Rebuilding" fund.

Thanks to the Committee.

Thanks to the hundreds of people who helped at home and all those who went with the convoy.

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