

Rough Transcript
WO Pablo Fernandez, KOCR (25 June 2017)

Deployment(s): Bosnia 1994, 1997

Interviewer/Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: *Quotations are not 100% verbatim*

Timecode	Content
0:15	First call to deploy to Croatia was in 1992. He wanted to deploy, but wasn't able to. "Getting that 'no' stayed with me. Resolved to do next one." He took courses and Class B in the meantime. Then got the late 1993 call for Op CAVALIER deployment with the LdSH. They trained in the armoury, then to Currie and with the LdSH.
1:45	Why? We're looking for something different, meaningful. That act of signing up gave your life meaning you couldn't get anywhere else. He could see what was happening in the news, something big, where Canada could play a pivotal role. Soldiers are tools of that policy. To then, tours to that point were Cyprus and Golan. This seemed different. Like being on a football team that practices but never plays. Applies to reservists too. "We believed in the job, we believed in our training."
3:50	Hopes for himself? A gamut from sense of adventure, to see the world and "to live by the gun, to be part of a team, to do things only those in uniform would see." He wanted to give back. His family are refugees, "running away from some very nasty stuff. Serving in Canada's military was huge for me. Felt strongly I had to give back." He's also a political junkie, watching machinations in the Balkans at a pivotal point in history. He thinks Canada has a definite role to play in the world. He wanted to see what he could do as an "instrument of policy, to make a difference." Looking back, they seem a little too idealistic.
6:30	Reactions? When he wanted to join the army at 17, his mom refused to sign for him. She cried, looked at him like he was becoming the enemy, like the men who'd terrorized and broke apart their family before they came to Canada. His father, through tears, signed the enrolment papers. When he told them about 1992 Croatia tour, "Mom came close to a coronary, had a bit of a mental breakdown. Didn't handle it well. But being selfish, I was determined to get overseas eventually." When the 1993 opportunity arose, he didn't tell them. Didn't want to stress them out. "I lied to my mom about what I was doing. Deployed to California and lied again. Told her three weeks from my deployment date. She found it hard, difficult, but she was more concerned about his well-being than upset with him about his bad life choices. Dad was steadfast, but not a cheerleader. As years go by, high school have reached out to me and two of them said they so wanted to be me back then, but they never found a way to put themselves in that situation."

	They talked about it after his tour, but they've reached out in recent years and it's something they live with now, the fact they didn't do it. "If I could do it, they could do it. It's something they live with. But I think it's ridiculous. They have beautiful lives., with meaning. But they hold that against themselves."
10:40	Culture in the unit? He thinks about 25 KOCR troops deployed on this mission. "There was a bit of a boiling kettle effect on the armoury floor... Croatia, Bosnia, and an armoured-centric battle group." The LdSH were melding with 8 Canadian Hussars who had been in Germany. That meant that many Regular Force were not Cougar-qualified, while the Reservists were qualified on the vehicle. In essence, the Regs needed the Reservists to run the Cougars. His troop was mainly 8 CH, so most of gunners and drivers were KOCR or other reservists.
13:00	There was a lot of excitement. Anybody who was healthy and qualified got to deploy.
13:30	Reg/Reserves? Always two layers to that: the official layer with the CO saying you're saviours and tour couldn't go ahead without you. But there's also the personal, Regular Force pushback. Not a lot of respect. They saw that as well. Most ex-8 CH had never worked with reservists. So there was some distrust, lack of experience with reservists, since they had spent the past four years in Germany. But it helped that reservists fixed what broke, understood the gunnery system etc. Regs provided the leadership and planning, while reservists provided technical skill. "There's always the odd Strathcona with a chip on his shoulder, knocking down reservists." Reservists who didn't perform got a hard ride, but those who did well were accepted. "There were still fights and guys being belligerent, but not to the degree I'd seen in other places."
16:50	Work up training? Simple stuff at first, getting people qualified on the Cougar through driver and gunnery course. Then a lot of "stables", going into the hangars to work on the vehicles. This is where you realize who knows what about the vehicles and how to fix them. Working in confined spaces, sharing tools. Tempers can flare. Also a lot of in-house exercises like security tasks and resiliency training. Lectures on what's available in terms of personal support, financial and legal advice. Lectures on rules of war, conduct in war zones. Then deployed to Camp Pendleton, California, for a month-long tour scenario: convoys, route recces, camp security, all-out conflict. They linked up with the infantry and artillery sub-units. Reacted to mortars and snipers, did observation post work. Felt confident at the end of it. It was very theatre and belligerent-centric. Good appreciation for weapons and capabilities of the belligerents. Also learned about religion, culture and politics of the region.
20:40	It was "right on the nose". There were few things that actually caught

	them off guard on tour as a result.
21:15	First impressions? A heck of a way to start anything. Landed in Croatia, drove to Visoko outside Sarajevo. Did this in the back of MLVW trucks. They were on the road and drove overnight—"the one thing they tell you not to do"—had a third of the battle group in the trucks, pitch black conditions. Dusty, loud, trying to catch glimpses of the countryside through gaps in the vehicle tarp. "Your imagination fills in what's missing." Heard shots fired several times. "You giggle. Convoy stops every now and then, but you don't know why." They finally got to the camp and lined up with their weapons. Then a soldier had the first negligent discharge of the tour. "We weren't in camp five minutes and already had our first ND. Experienced NCOs were yelling..."
24:15	Headed to troop lines after being welcomed by 12 RBC (outgoing regiment). They cohabited for several weeks during the handover/relief in place. The outgoing troops taught them what to look or watch for. Snipers etc.
25:30	His job? Cougar driver for the Troop Warrant Officer. He was a corporal. This is significant because in Alpha Patrol (the second callsign in the order of march in the troop) they ate a lot of dust on the road. And administratively the WO was rarely around his own vehicle because he's looking after the troop as a whole. WO Izzard was "a fantastic soldier and leader". But they rarely saw him, so he and the gunner looked after the vehicle. "We were probably the busiest callsign because we only had two people to do the tasks, instead of the usual three."
28:00	Average day? Patrolling, two Cougars at a time. Presence patrols along the battle lines. Visiting various observation posts. Those in Ops are exposed, so they like to receive friendly visitors. A morale boost. Also did convoy or VIP escorts. Did this for UN visitors too. Also did the bus run to Sarajevo. "That was an ugly one." The bus ran from Visoko to Sarajevo, but could only be done once because it needed protection—a Cougar in front and back, driving as fast as they could. Sniper and machine gun fire was ridiculous. "We used Cougars as shields. Sometimes guys returned fire. It wasn't unusual to get to Sarajevo to find wounded and dead on the bus. It was a nasty one."
31:10	Other jobs: OPs for a week on a high feature. Traditional peacekeeping role observing and recording infractions. A troop WO from Recce Squadron got shot in the back doing this.
31:50	They did battle line inspections too. To ensure they hadn't shifted. Nothing to do with warfighting; everything to do with diplomacy. You knew they were lying to Canadians.
32:40	How adequate was the equipment? The Cougar was amazingly adequate. The warring factions had no idea about their capabilities, so they used kids to get up close and check out its features—gun, armour, ammunition. "It gave them pause because they didn't know what it

	could do. And it has a ridiculous range for such a vehicle and can go fast, up to 100 kph. It could also get up cattle trails. Mobile, fast and could go a long way. With limited logistics, like a light tank. And its main gun got the point across—at one time hitting a T54 or making a mess on a hillside.” Armour could deflect a 14.7 [14.5 mm? 12.7 mm?]
35:25	Belligerents had no qualms about taking shots at lighter vehicles like the Iltis—because it couldn’t fire back like the Cougar. “Iltis is basically a golf cart on 4x4 tires. Didn’t like using it. Guys put blast blankets on the floor for protection. Engineers used C4 and blast blankets to weather a blast on an M113.”
37:05	Reality vs expectations? He thinks people’s problems arise from this. Military does a good job of preparing people to react according to drills and SOPs, but it doesn’t prepare you for a new reality. “You’re building your reality as you go along. If you’ve never been overseas before, there’s no way you can pre-conceive. So your mind is building a narrative to match reality and a lot of times it doesn’t fit, or it changes.” In an instant, your world shifts upside down and you have to start over. You’re still a human being, trying to make sense.
39:10	He expected dramatic, violent instances. Or moments of tender interaction with the population. But it’s 99% boredom, going through the motions. Going over your vehicle or ammunition, driving the same routes week after week. But the higher level politics are still in play, changing the situation. A village gets bombed, war atrocities, you see hospitals with humanity at its worst and at its best. Even when you’re bored, you know tomorrow could be a completely different day. How will news on CNN affect those at lower levels? “Your feet are never really firmly under you.”
42:00	Didn’t have the capacity to build a whole reality before getting to theatre, like some guys did. There’s no way anyone can know. But you leave theatre with a different reality.
42:50	Memorable day? Had a couple of rough days, but didn’t lose anybody. Two wounded, but “didn’t have to drape a coffin”. The one thing that affected him the most was the children’s hospital on the outskirts of their AOR. It was abandoned when the war came through. It used to be on the Muslim side. Most staff left. Children were sick to begin with, acute illnesses, mental health issues. Babies. Just left. Eventually some nurses and a doctor took it over. They lacked supplies. Canadians gave them generator, water. “The smell stays with you. Death. That’s exactly what it is. When you walk the hallways and see who the dead bodies are, the sick... it’s kids. Malnourished. Gangrene. Lots of crying. Some of them just want to be held. They reach out to you. Seeing the dead and dying, you couldn’t help some of these kids. To see a handful of people trying to do their best in a bad situation, it sticks with you. We debriefed afterwards. A few guys, parents, couldn’t handle it and just broke down. It affects you at a human level.” It helped to focus

	<p>why they were there. The battle group is a war-fighting machine, but this was “a different calling. We went into Bosnia almost looking for a fight, and we realized our energies could be better spent elsewhere.”</p>
47:30	<p>On a positive note, they used to do camp security. He did three weeks of his tour on the camp’s front gate, interacting with the children who came to the gate bored or looking for candy. One girl stood out, looked to be eight, and she’d often stay all day, tossing rocks or talking to the soldiers. He talked to her through an interpreter. Her name was Sunella. Her dad and uncle had been killed in the war. She lived with her mother, who spent all her waking hours working. She had nowhere else to go during the day. She found a safe place outside the camp. “This little girl, she was so beautiful, you know... [long pause]... “ She’d start talking to him every day he was on the gate. Turns out she was 13, not 8. Very small. “She seemed poetic and eloquent, the way she spoke.” He’d sneak some candy for her. When it was time to redeploy, he asked one of her friends to tell her. He didn’t see her until he was on the bus and she was running down the street after it, looking for him. They waved to each other.</p>
52:10	<p>She survived the war and found him on Facebook a few years ago. They talked using Google Translate. Last Remembrance Day she sent him a scanned image of his tour photo, which he’d forgotten he’d given to her all those years ago. “In that craziness of that war, Sunella was just a complete opposite of what was good and fine. [pause] She suffered a lot and she was still a beautiful soul.”</p>
53:45	<p>Homecoming? “Home was hard. I tried not to come home. I heard of guys in Croatia putting in tour extensions and I tried to do that.” The contrasts he saw in the countryside and people had a fascinating, strong impact on him. “Like a drug to my soul. “ He volunteered for everything, to get out and see more, meet more people. His Serbo-Croat got pretty good. “I was living on a high when I was there...intoxicating. I didn’t want to come home. But they were realizing these extended tours in Croatia weren’t good for people.” He reluctantly came home.</p>
56:00	<p>Within a couple weeks of being home, he realized this intense experience was “fleeting. It couldn’t define me. I had to get my shit together. To build something . To go to school. Knew it cognitively, but not emotionally. So we drank a lot. So much money and time drinking together. Six months of my life just disappeared.” He says he has PTSD, but doesn’t think it’s from that tour. He self-medicated then, but to this day doesn’t really know why. “Everything else seemed boring, bland, pedestrian. And drinking every night was the closest I could get to what I’d had there.” Parading with his unit and going to school eventually helped. “It was hard to leave behind a life that had such meaning and purpose. You finally have a purpose. Meaning in your life.” Going from that to being “Joe Blow in the street and so little purpose... you could</p>

	literally spend weeks in bed and it wouldn't matter. I found that hard."
59:15	Final thoughts? "I struggled for years after my tours in Bosnia. I couldn't disconnect. You give a lot of your life and soul to these kinds of missions, but you never see the end of it... World War Two, there was an end and everyone came home to flags waving, marches, the end of war, rebuilding and armistice between the war-fighters. I never saw that. I gave of myself to this mission, but I never saw its conclusion, the end, the critical point." He's sure Afghanistan will be the same, no clear demarcation line, achieving the aim and going home. For him, he came home and Bosnia in 1997 "was still a thing". "You never make peace. You're literally a pawn in space." You never see why... the time, the sacrifice . "I treasure it, but I don't cling to it like I used to for such a long time. When we left, Sarajevo was on fire. We'd spent all this energy... we did what we had to do... but on the individual level you don't see your contribution lead to anything. It's small. Sunella. The hospital. No closure. Bosnia is much better place now, but I didn't see it. I just experienced it when it was really bad."
1:03:40	It's on his bucketlist to go back. "My bucketlist is me and my motorcycle." At the end of the day he wants to reconnect.
	Additional visuals desired: --Sunella's FB page/image, his tour photo