

Night Passage to Pristina - Part 1

By Dick Culver

The shooting war in Kosovo was beginning to wind down, and Jake Livingstone and I were headed for Pristina to see for ourselves. A week in a "safe house" in Tirana, Albania had given us a chance to orient ourselves to the "Albanian" attitude towards the war. We needed the time to get our Press Credentials from NATO and establish our bona fides for travel in the Kosovo countryside. What made me a bit apprehensive was that there was a rumor that Jake had a price on his head in the Balkans.

"Hey Jake, you reckon they'd lock us up if we're caught?"

"Culver, if they catch you with me, gettin' locked up is gonna' be the least of your worries!"

"Oh good, Jake! I think I'll go out and find a pair of handcuffs!"

"Handcuffs? I thought you understood, it's US who are gonna' be wearing the bracelets!"

"Jake, YOU misunderstand MY idea! If it looks like they're gonna' close in on us, I'm gonna' slap the cuffs on you and yell, I've got him, I've got him!"

"@\$\$hole!"

Barracks humor aside, the local attitudes seemed to indicate a need for treading extremely lightly on initial contact with roving individuals in the Kosovo countryside. Since the town of Pristina was rumored to be occupied by the British Forces, I wasn't concerned about our movement once we reached the seat of the provisional governmental control of the NATO forces in Pristina, but it would appear that everyone was simply waiting for NATO to withdraw so full blown hostilities could be renewed.

Since we were not allowed to pack a belt gun into Albania, and I hadn't had an opportunity to put a rock in my sock to allow me to arm myself - (that was high on my list), at this point my entire armament consisted of an extremely sharp Spyderco "Catcher" filleting knife in my hip pocket and a Newt Livesley G-45 Neck Knife. Jake was also armed with a couple of shivs. Our party consisted of two individuals traveling by air into Kosovo through Macedonia, with Jake and I grabbing a car for hire to take us to the Albanian-Kosovo border. The original plan called for the "ground-bound crew" to be picked up by an agent at the Kosovo border and to continue our sojourn to Pristina by car. Our transportation was to be supplied by an operative nicknamed "Hair Oil"... Better we should have hired Gomer Pyle!

Leaving Tirana, our initial foray towards Kosovo started out in a tame enough fashion, but this was to change materially as we headed into the mountains. Our driver was a frustrated Mario Andretti with a seeming death wish. The roads reminded me of my youth in the Kentucky and West Virginia mountains on roads designed for cars the width of Model A Fords. The only difference was a total lack of guard rails and a drop so severe that a

misdirected plunge over the edge would have allowed a scream that would have continued for a full five minutes before hitting bottom. Come to find out, the driver was hoping to shorten his exposure to the marauding bands in the hills to an absolute minimum. This was being accomplished by speeds that would cause Indianapolis Race Drivers to turn green with envy. My green color in the back seat had nothing to do with envy!

We were passing all sorts of mule or horse drawn carts, including several tractors towing farm wagons full of returning Kosovo Muslims. Ostensibly the pilgrims on the road were heading home for a kinder, gentler (and hopefully Serb free) Kosovo. The initial impression of the returning vehicles was of some sort of gigantic hayride. The pilgrims seemed in fine spirits, waving and yelling to one another. As we neared the Kosovo Border, the traffic picked up considerably, and we were soon joined by an extremely frustrated Italian NATO motorcycle cop attempting to make order out of chaos without much success. As we neared the border, our driver's speed picked up along with our desire to meet "Hair Oil" at the Kosovo Border. *Anything* to get out of that damned car! I might not have been so anxious if I had known what was coming. Our driver dropped us off about 200 yards from a German Panzer outfit guarding the Albanian/Kosovo border and sped off with his doors hardly closed... Apparently, he knew something we didn't. We were fixin' to get an education however.

By the time our fleeing ride from Tirana had dropped us off, twilight was closing in on the Kosovo countryside. The Germans had a large tank and a number of armored personnel carriers guarding the border. The road was lined with razor wire with red triangles suspended at regular intervals. The signs were stenciled with the rather unsettling marking of "*Minen*". Hummm... A small "pull-off" area alongside the road about 50 yards inside the Kosovo Border provided the only possible stopping place for any traffic from Pristina. This wide spot was right next to the razor wire and easily within sight of the border check station. This small wide spot would have allowed a single small vehicle to have parked - maybe! Our arrangements were to have been picked up at the Kosovo Border at 1800, and it was now 1730... I checked with the civilian interpreter assigned to the Panzer Unit. He told me that he had been there all day, and there had been absolutely no one asking for us, and no one had been parked in the only pull-off spot during his entire tenure. Jake and I settled down, leaning against our rucksacks waiting for Hair-Oil to arrive. Our last conversation with Hair-Oil had indicated that all the bridges had been blown between the border and Pristina, and that heavy fighting was still ensuing in the streets. Perhaps he had simply been delayed or detained due to tactical considerations. We were willing to grant him the benefit of the doubt. The truth was somewhat more amusing, but we weren't to get the straight scoop until later. There's an old saying that the truth shall make you free - in this case the truth would change our attitude of annoyance to one of carefully contemplated homicide!

After a number of hours it became obvious that Hair-Oil wasn't gonna' show. We were faced with sleeping alongside the road using our rucksacks for a pillow. The only safe waiting area was a strip about 6 feet wide next to the mine field where an inadvertent roll-over while sleeping had the potential of making our eardrums meet in the middle or worse. The prospect of instant vaporization of a couple of wayfaring military correspondents was not appealing! I was beginning to mentally curse Hair-Oil and I hadn't even met him yet!

By 2100 we had decided that Hair-Oil definitely wasn't gonna' show, and the prospect of sleeping on the edge of a minefield was not my idea of fun. Something had to be done. Jake

and I flipped a coin and I lost. It was my job to hit the Panzer interpreter up for a ride in the direction of Pristina. After promising the stalwart interpreter a copy of the magazine with a picture of him directing traffic, he agreed to flag us down a reliable ride. I took a picture of the interpreter with my Nikon, although it was a bit dark for anything to come out. Since he wasn't up on the nuances of photography, I suppose that he figured that I was... The deal was sealed, however, and he started interrogating some of the more reliable pilgrims returning to their homes.

Finally the interpreter came over and pointed to an aging YUGO automobile with a driver who could have played the part of "Lurch" in the Addams Family. The driver stood about 6' tall, was built like a tree trunk, and had a dark 6-day growth of beard. His knuckles barely cleared the deck when he walked. This was not a man to meet in a dark alley. The YUGO should have been junked years ago and was devoid of any kind of handles on the inside of the doors with the exception of the drivers side. No window cranks, no door handles, and no way out unless the driver chose to let you out. The muffler was toast, and the fumes of the exhaust simply seeped through the holes in the floorboard. Jake drew the back seat. Jake's rear window was rolled down about 1", but couldn't be adjusted. If (and this was a BIG if) the YUGO obtained max velocity of 40 mph, the resultant suction would draw the exhaust fumes out of the car. The car would barely do 40 mph and the resultant noises indicating that the engine was about to self-destruct were a bit disconcerting. We forged ahead into the night.

Our first stop was mandated by a NATO check point that indicated the route was sprinkled with Serb assassination squads and that we'd better have a convincing story if stopped. AKs are apolitical. Warmly reassured, we settled back while Lurch increased the velocity of his aging mobile coffin. We passed several small villages that seemed to be deserted. Hair Oil had at least part of his story right, some of the bridges were blown, but the resourceful residents had made emergency detours that sufficed for passage. Suddenly, the adrenaline factor increased exponentially! Lurch pulled off the road, stopped the YUGO and turned off the lights. We were now in what would appear to be total darkness next to a patch of woods. Uh oh... the car died. Lurch suddenly started using the light dimmer to send light signals to unseen parties. The unsettling part was that several other unseen cars were answering the signal. A vivid imagination conjured up Serbs with AKs and an attitude approaching the YUGO. False alarm, Lurch started the car and we pulled back onto the road and continued the journey. Not a word had been spoken at this point.

Suddenly Lurch initiated the first conversation.

"You Americans?"

"Yes, we're Americans"

"You bomb Serbs? Bad, bad! Boom, boom, boom!"

This apparently exhausted Lurch's entire command of the English Language as no more conversation was forthcoming... We were then left with the following interpretation to his cryptic conversation:

"You Americans?" - no interpretation necessary.

"You bomb Serbs? Bad, bad! Boom, boom!" - now this could be interpreted several ways as best Jake and I could figure. Either the Americans bombed the Bad, bad Serbs to his (Lurch's) satisfaction -or- It was extremely bad that we bombed the Serbs who were his buddies.

Lurch's lack of ability to communicate his exact feelings left a cold feeling in the pit of the stomach. This was multiplied many times as Lurch again pulled off the road and used his headlights to signal some unseen individual or individual. Visions of being left laying in a Kosovoian ditch left us contemplating our life insurance. Unfortunately, the bodies would have simply disappeared or had the heads mounted on sharpened stakes alongside the road. I was beginning to regret not having picked up those handcuffs in Tirana.

The next "signaling stop" also provided Lurch an opportunity to answer the call of nature, and Jake and myself crawled across the controls and exited through the driver's door (the only one with an inside door handle). We now figure that we might well be in a very tight spot depending on which interpretation fitted Lurch's analysis of the Serbian bombing situation. We could almost see phantom Serbs approaching the YUGO from the tree line. Having only a couple of "shivs" to repel boarders, we discussed our options. Jake insisted on remaining in the back seat (due no doubt, to the much coveted 1" crack in the rear window). The conversation went something like this:

"Hey Jake, ya' wanna' get up front for awhile? Your legs are longer than mine!" I said angling for a seat next to the only source of fresh air in the exhaust filled YUGO.

"Naw, that's OK, I'm used to sitting in the back!"

Translation, "You ain't getting' me up there, I like fresh air!"

"Well, if it gets a bit exciting, are you gonna' take care of Lurch's throat?"

"Yeah, I'll take the throat!" sez Jake.

"OK, I'll take the top of his right arm on the steering wheel, or if he makes a move, I'll sink mine into his right side. I figure that if I can get the top of his right arm, I can take his right hand out of action. If not, I'll go in under the ribs! Every little bit helps! Maybe, just maybe, we can grab a couple of AKs and head into the tree line!"

"Yeah, sounds like a plan! Uh oh, here comes Lurch... He may be fakin' on how much English he understands!"

We climbed back into the car since the external door handles were still working. Lurch kicked the YUGO over, and we headed off into the night. After several more signaling stops, we finally pulled off onto to some sort of side road and stopped in a field. Lurch exited the car without a word and disappeared. Oh Good!...

Again, Jake and I pulled the climb over the seat bit, exited the YUGO, and started reviewing our options.

"Hey Jake, where the hell do you figure we are?"

"Damned if I know, but that faint light on the skyline MAY be Pristina!"

"OK, that leaves us two options, either head for the woods and sack out until it gets light enough to see, or just use a little "dead reckoning" (bad choice of words) and head for that faint glow on the skyline! Let's give it a couple more minutes and make our move! Damn, and me with no handcuffs!"

Our planning was interrupted by several figures moving through the darkness. Soon, Lurch reappeared with a very nice looking young lady and a middle aged guy. It turned out that the girl was a 5th year Medical student with her daddy. Much to our relief, the girl spoke excellent English. A short conversation revealed that these folks were extremely anti-Serb and appreciated the U.S. Bombing effort! Whew... She understood that we were going to Pristina to cover the situation for the *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

The girl, her daddy and Lurch went into a huddle. When they came back over, it seemed that the young lady and her daddy had talked Lurch into escorting us into Pristina that night! Wonder of wonders – The Swede's Odinist roots must be in tune with the Scandinavian hierarchy. Maybe, just maybe, Valhalla was a bit full at the moment - I was in no great rush to investigate the Hall of Honor before my time! Barring some unforeseen disaster, it looked like a very long night might be going to result in a rack in Pristina.

The rest of the trip was a bit more relaxed, although I noticed that Jake was striking up a fair speaking relationship with the young medical student. We finally pulled into the back of the Grand Hotel in Pristina. We all got out and shook hands. Feeling that we owed these fine folks something for getting us to Pristina in one piece, we dug in our pockets for extra deutsch-marks to at least pay them for their fuel and indicate that we truly appreciated their help. They didn't want to take anything as they considered us (as representatives of America) their saviors from the Serbs. With much persuading, we finally got them to take some small remuneration, but only under protest. As we were parting, the good-looking medical student grabbed Jake and kissed him! With my luck, you guessed it - I got hugged and sloppily kissed by Lurch, six-day growth of beard and all! Some people just live right I guess. I was beginning to understand why Jake had a price on his head...

I admit to feeling a large twinge of remorse for planning Lurch's demise - very nice folks in retrospect, but I'd have sure felt a bit better if I'd have had a better translation of:

"Bomb Serbs?... Bad, Bad... Boom boom boom!"

Just goes to show you, appearances can be deceiving!

ROC