

Night Passage to Pristina - Part 2

By Dick Culver

Waving goodbye to our benefactors, Jake and I headed for the lobby of the Grand Hotel. The place seemed to be in a state of well-ordered bedlam. The desk was manned by a confused but willing hotel clerk, but they had no reservations for Jake and me. As it turned out, this wasn't a real problem, as the Serb Assassination Squads had just exited stage left. Rooms were available as long as we didn't mind essentially hot racking it with the Serb assassins... The Serbs had grabbed a hat and departed for safer digs.

Since this was a *Soldier of Fortune* evolution, it seemed only proper to make contact with Colonel Bob Brown, who was to meet us that evening in the Grand Hotel. Easier said than done. The clerk did a thorough check of his records and couldn't find any registration for Col. Bob Brown. Now, this was absurd; he *HAD* to be there, there just ain't anywhere else to crash in Pristina. Ugly images began to seep into our imaginations. Only the sight of a piece of mail for the Colonel prevented us from mounting out a search party. We pointed out the note, and the clerk said something clever like, "Oh, *THAT* Colonel Brown?" It was obvious that the clerk could speak pretty good English, but his reading and comprehension were a bit shaky.

Jake and I grabbed a room on the 9th deck (a mixed blessing since the elevators seldom functioned). Our location was great for the leg muscles, but I was cursing the amount of gear I had brought along. It DID give us a pigeon's eye view of much of the city.

We stopped by the Colonel's room and found that his trip has been essentially uneventful. Just my luck; if there's a hard way to do something, I seem to gravitate to it. In the Marines, when I heard that ten percent of the troops were deploying by ship, I always packed my seabag - I was never wrong. My luck had held!

We stowed our gear and settled down for the night.

The dawn broke and it suddenly occurred to us that our last meal had been in Tirana. The activities with our kamikaze driver and Lurch had taken their toll on our stomachs. Obviously, breakfast was in order. The dining room of the Grand Hotel was neat and clean, if you didn't count the remnants of the huge plate glass windows not yet removed from the area around the now vacant openings. While the accuracy of the Cruise Missiles was superb, concussion still removed a mighty amount of glass.

A rather decent European Style breakfast buffet was laid out on a large serving table. Piles of plates summoned the masses to partake of the morning offering. It took little urging to get me to the source of chow. They had everything imaginable from eggs and bacon to fresh melons. I knew things were getting back to normal when a young cultural advisor for the U.N. standing in line with me wanted to know if I thought the food was "organically grown." *Organically grown?* Dear Allah, the entire world is just sweeping up the debris of war, and she wants "organically grown" chow - no wonder the U.N. can't keep their stuff in one bag! Feeling certain that the locals HAD grown the stuff organically (*how* organically worried me a little to tell the truth!), I assured the cultural advisor that it was almost certainly organically grown, wisely keeping my suspicions to myself.

After disposing of the morning offerings and enjoying a morning cigar, I looked up to see a rather tall individual entering the dining room from the lobby. This gent was festooned with cameras and headed straight for our table. Jake nudged me.

"Hey Dick, there's the clown who didn't pick us up last night!"

"Really? You mean *Hair Oil*?... Do you know this guy?"

"Oh yeah! He ain't my favorite human being, and last night removed any decent feelings that I may have had about him!"

"Just who is this guy Hair Oil?" I asked innocently.

"Well, Colonel Bob sometimes hires this guy to do odd jobs and furnish transportation to wayfaring reporters," said Jake.

"Is this the guy you and Harry were talking to on the phone in Tirana?" I asked.

A quick aside. Harry was a former Navy Seal whose impressive size and probable ferocity was softened a bit by an absolutely evil sense of humor. While Harry was technically not a member of our expedition, he had attached himself to our bunch. A common interest and friendship from earlier forays made us spiritual if not actual partners. Harry was a welcome addition and companion.

"Yep, he's the one! Didn't Harry and I tell you he was an untrustworthy @\$\$hole! If the bullets ain't flyin' Hair Oil is pretty reliable. Hair Oil also tends to be reliable if someone's threatening to break his rice bowl. It's my guess he was scared spittleless to make that trip in the middle of the night!"

"Well, how about the firefights that were still going on in the streets?" I asked.

"I was talking to one of the kids of the Atlantic Brigade last night for a minute or two and he said that there hadn't been any active shooting in the streets for several days. He thought Hair Oil simply heard the kids celebrating their capture of the bar in the hotel Mexican style, by firing their AKs into the air in a fit of youthful enthusiasm!"

The light began to dawn. It seems that the kids of the KLA had made the capture of the bar in the Grand Hotel a major priority, and as the Serbs were taking flight, they celebrated their "bar conquest" by firing their weapons in the air in the manner of most partisan soldiers, no doubt well fortified with the alcoholic offerings of the bar's merchandise!

Colonel Brown greeted Hair Oil. Hair Oil then looked at Jake and demanded to know where we had been the night before. Jake told him that we had waited for over three hours after his arranged arrival time and hadn't seen hide nor hair of him. Hair Oil protested vigorously that he had been there for hours before the appointed pick up time of 1800.

At this point my patience was wearing thin.

"I don't know where you were *Hair Oil*, but the interpreter told us that *NO ONE* had been there all day, and there was only one spot where a car could park! To be as polite as I can, I'd say that you are a prevaricating male puppy of a female canine! Don't try to Bull \$++t an old Bull \$++tter!". You could have gotten us killed with your BS."

"Just who the hell are you?" said Hair Oil.

"I'm the guy who just called you a lying SOB!" I sez.

Jake, who hadn't said a word since the initial exchange, began looking at him like it was time to stop talking and start an a\$\$ whippin'. Hair Oil stepped back. Jake and I stood up. Colonel Bob took Hair Oil by the arm and led him to a table by the now non-existent window and told us to stay where we were, sit down, and behave, while he took Hair Oil over and had a long talk with him. Jake and I sat and ground our teeth while Colonel Bob had a spirited conversation with our missing ride from the night before. The Colonel then motioned for the two of us to come over. With no prompting, Hair Oil started in on his vehement denial again, indicating that it was the two of us who were lying. With this, Jake grabbed Hair Oil by the collar and without another word, started a swing designed to separate Hair Oil's head from his shoulders. With this, Hair Oil made a swipe at his photographer's vest as if to draw a pistol. Now I've seen this move many a time, and I know what comes next.

"I'm gonna' kill you," says Hair Oil to Jake!

Anticipating a belt gun appearing in Hair Oil's hand, I slid around to the other side of the table and pulled a 6" long and very sharp Spyderco filleting Knife out of my hip pocket. Jake was trying to get a better swing at Hair Oil. By now I was in front of Hair Oil as he attempted to put Colonel Brown between him and Jake. He now heard my blade snap open and lock.

"You're a dead man!" says Hair Oil to me.

"Not unless you're a lot better than I think you are!" I sez, planning to plant the Spyderco up to the hilt in Hair Oil's gizzard.

At this point Colonel Bob began to see all the pieces of a major dust up falling into place.

"For Christ's sake don't kill him!" says the Colonel, visibly worried about Hair Oil's imminent demise.

Colonel Brown, now convinced that he had a couple of deranged idiots working for him, ordered us to go sit down at our former table. Col. Bob told us under pain of death not to engage Hair Oil in any further conversation - PERIOD! He then turned to Hair Oil and told him to get the hell out of the hotel and to stay away from Jake and me for his continued safety. At this point, I spied a well dressed young man who appeared to be working for the hotel. He was walking rather rapidly toward me and seemed to be concerned about my rather wicked looking knife, which I was returning to my hip pocket. He turned out to be the Hotel security man, who had been watching the entire situation develop. Bear in mind, the entire evolution had occurred in the space of less than a minute.

"Please sir," the security man said, "I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't knife the gentleman in the dining room!" in a tone that indicated that knifing him in any other location would be perfectly alright with him!

"No problem," sez I, "I was just planning on cleaning my nails and my compatriots pointed out that no true gentleman ever cleans his nails in the dining room. I apologize for my rudeness!"

The security man was visibly relieved but saw the humor of the situation.

"You have my personal thanks," he says. "We're just getting the dining room cleaned up and good help is getting hard to find. Most of the young men are currently employed by the KLA. You can see my problem!"

As Hair Oil exited the hotel he passed Harry, who was sitting on the front steps enjoying the sunshine. Harry looked up at Hair Oil.

"Hey, Hair Oil, you mean nobody's killed you yet?"

Hair Oil looked at Harry unbelievably and increased his pace towards the street! I never saw Hair Oil again.

The next few days were spent interviewing participants of the recent fighting. The members of the KLA (the Kosovo Liberation Army) were a motley group composed mainly of Kosovars of Albanian extraction, usually Muslims. One rather interesting faction was a group that called themselves "The Atlantic Brigade". This outfit had been recruited in the Bronx mostly from those with relatives fighting the Serbs. One young lady named Linda, who was a 16 year old high school student, wore an American Flag bandana around her head. Her father was the leader of one of the KLA groups. Most were about 18 to 24 years old, and while dedicated to the cause were essentially youngsters with an adventurous spirit. One red-haired Irishman in his mid-20s was a true Mercenary, on his third war and already looking for another.

I ordered a beer at the bar. A smiling bar tender delivered the requested libation. I paid him in Deutch Marks, the only currency I had available. The barkeep smiled widely and gave me change in Serbian money. Being a bit dry, I ordered another. Sliding my Serbian change toward him brought an instant frown. He shook his head with a frown. Now what? I asked what was wrong. He told me with a slight smile that they didn't take Serbian money! Huh?

"But YOU just gave me the change," I said!

"Yes sir, that's true, but we don't *TAKE* Serbian money," he said with a grin.

"Now wait a minute! How in the heck am I supposed to get rid of this stuff," I inquired?

"I'm quite sure I don't know," replied bar tender, with a smirk on his face!

Lesson learned, never underestimate the guile of your enemy! These guys were survivors! I returned to the table with the kids from the Atlantic Brigade.

It seems that the Atlantic Brigade (and other freedom fighters) without prior military experience were trained over the border in Albania for approximately four weeks. They were then armed with essentially new AKs and a few brand new Barrett .50 Caliber Sniper Rifles. The newly trained recruits were then herded up to the Kosovo border and pointed in the right direction. Artillery and air support were provided by (ahem...) unseen forces and helped speed the war to a close. Cruise Missiles took out the Post Office and Police Stations in Pristina in an almost surgical fashion. This was a VERY well financed war!

About the only peripheral damage Pristina sustained from the missile attacks was broken glass from nearby buildings. The Cruise Missile strikes were designed to remove the records from police sources, and the destruction of the post office prevented any use of Post Office records for pinpointing the addresses of those with an Albanian background. Otherwise, the city of Pristina was left largely intact. Jake and I foraged through the rubble of the destroyed Police Station and found many of the Serbian records kept on "enemies of the state," complete with photographs and fingerprints. Someone had done a very professional job of removing the records...

The Brit Paras (NATO) were assigned to keep the peace in Pristina, and a relatively quiet demeanor of the local citizens indicated that they were successful. A strong military presence ensured compliance. The British Major who seemed to be running things at the military headquarters was conducting business in the typically understated British manner. He was not happy that some of the ethnic Serbs had chosen to stay in a "liberated Pristina," however! Their presence in close proximity to the returning Albanian Kosovars provided an extremely tempting target. The Albanian Kosovars whose families had been "purged" in the interest of Serbian ethnic cleansing were understandably upset. Isolated but continual instances of Albanian revenge often occurred during the hours of darkness. Serbian residents residing in the countryside outside the more populated areas of Pristina were particularly juicy targets. Needless to say, the remaining Serbs were petrified.

One condition of the cease-fire allowed only Albanian KLA members with clearly defined police duties to keep their weapons. This was only very loosely enforced. The Major explained that eventually his forces would be withdrawn. The resulting vacuum would result in chaos, and he wasn't enthusiastic about leaving the citizens with no way to protect themselves. As I understood it, his policy came close to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the U.S. Military. No incidents, no weapons confiscation. A *very* understanding man, that Major. I know I certainly wouldn't have turned in *MYAK*!

Jake and I bummed rides with the Paras with the blessings of the British Major. After several patrols, it became obvious that the streets were quiet and likely to remain that way as long as the Brits remained in charge. Harry, Jake and I decided to do a little free-lance sight seeing for ourselves. The streets remained quiet. We headed back to the Grand Hotel.

Young Linda, the teen age volunteer from the Bronx, had made contact with her father, who now proudly stood with his arm around her. Several members of the Atlantic Brigade, who had been regaling us with stories of their daring-do in typical youthful enthusiasm, were heading to the hinterlands and offered to take anyone interested to see some of the

farmhouses where the fighting had raged several days before. Harry chose to go in order to take pictures with his digital Sony Camcorder. Jake and I had received a different assignment and had to pass. The stories that filtered back were almost unbelievable!

Entire families of Albanian extraction had been murdered and left to rot in their houses. The Serbs not only killed the people, but also any dogs that chose to stay close to their masters. The cats fled, having only a culinary interest in those who had supplied their sustenance and shelter. At least one body was usually thrown down the family well to ensure that the water supply was poisoned. The bodies were often scalped, and the faces were skinned from the bodies, leaving only the skull and underlying muscle tissue. The scalped faces were usually nailed to the sides of the houses. A favorite means of warning any who chose to remain was the beheading of some of the corpses and placing the head on a sharpened stake for the sheer terror effect. This wasn't just murder, it was barbarism not seen since the Middle Ages. The killing of the ethnic Albanians to "cleanse" the population was so foreign to my nature as to boggle my mind. Understandably upset, the returning (and surviving) Albanians wanted revenge. While killing is killing, killing to purge the "State" is reprehensible. Killing for revenge is understandable. I understand revenge as it often represents justice, whereas legal satisfaction of the law does not. No wonder the remaining Serbs were getting nervous!

A number of days of roaming the streets of Pristina had begun to wear thin and it was time to start thinking of branching out a bit. We had planned to visit the Marines who had come ashore, but by the time we were ready to leave they were in the process of relocating, leaving the 1st Army Division in place. Since this was Jake's old unit, we decided to drop in on "The Big Red One".

Colonel Brown was heading out in a different direction to cover the situation more completely further north. Jake and I were on our own once again. We departed with Harry in tow. We bummed a ride headed toward the enclave of the 1st Division known as Camp Bonesteel. We stopped in the nearest town to the Army CP which was overrun with U.S. Army troops. Everything had come to a stop to oblige a bunch of "visiting firemen" were making a publicity stop. We were introduced to the Commanding General of the Big Red One and stood by while visiting Congressmen came through for a politically obligatory hand shaking and speech making stop.

The General arranged for a ride for us to Camp Bonesteel with the Division's Public Affairs Officer, Major Eric Gunhaus. As the meeting broke up and the politicians headed out to their next stop, Major Gunhaus took us to the Base Camp in his Hummer. As could be imagined, the camp for an entire Army Division was of gigantic proportions. The camp was being built as we watched. Major Gunhaus provided us with an excellent briefing and offered us a ride to Macedonia in the General's Blackhawk. This HAD to be preferable to another thrilling ride through the Albanian mountains with our personal Mario Andretti.

In a fit of generosity, Jake presented Major Gunhaus with his personal Livesay Neck Knife. Most appropriate, I thought, as Gunhaus had gone out of his way to ensure that three wayfaring adventurers had enjoyed their stay with the 1st Division. Eric waved goodbye to us as we boarded the General's chopper on our way to the NATO re-supply base in Macedonia. I still exchange an occasional e-mail with young Gunhaus, a truly fine and accommodating gentleman.

The trip proved uneventful, the only casualty being my press credentials hung unwisely around my neck. I was extremely familiar with the riding characteristics of CH-46s, CH-53s and UH1-Es, but the down wash of a Blackhawk must be experienced to be believed! Trying to lean out the door to get a couple of good shots with the camera resulted in an unidentified object being sucked out the door of the chopper! Upppsss...My press credentials were drifting slowly down somewhere between Bonesteel and the Macedonian re-supply base. I immediately started thinking up excuses as to why I was wandering around the Balkan countryside without proper identification. Nothing to do but get a fresh set in Tirana, IF I ever got to Tirana!

The folks at the re-supply base were busier than a one legged man in an @\$\$kicking contest. Nothing really to do here but arrange for some land transport to the Albanian border. Since we weren't to be traveling through any known hostile territory, it sounded like a piece of cake. Engaging a cab driver with a sense of adventure, we propositioned him to take us all the way into Tirana. I climbed into the back seat and began to relax. All went well, the countryside was beautiful. Night began to fall, and our first screw-up became obvious as we approached the Macedonian-Albanian Border. Since we had entered Kosovo directly from Albania we had no entry visas indicating that we had ever crossed the Macedonian Border. The explanation was simple, but the fact that the Border Guards had a limited command of English made the situation a bit dicey.

We bailed out of the Taxi and went into the check station. What to do? We did the only honorable thing, we lied and bribed the guard. We used the universal passport in war-torn countries - money!

The rest of the trip was uneventful. No thousand foot drop over roads with no guardrails, and no Lurch signaling unseen checkpoints with his headlights. How boring. The trip seemed interminable as night fell over the countryside.

As our stalwart Taxi Driver pulled up in front of the Safe House, we climbed out with a sigh of relief. We wound our way through a back alley to reach our refuge. Half expecting Colonel Bob to have beat us home, we found the house unoccupied. Ah well, the prospect of a good night's sleep summoned. We crashed.

The next dawn gave us time to clean up our gear and check with the NATO folks on any other likely prospects of lively action in Kosovo. I, of course, had to renew my NATO Press Credentials. I went through filling out the required forms and having a picture attached.

Proudly clutching my renewed bona fides, I noticed Jake talking to a couple of Chinese gentlemen to one side. It seems that they were Chinese Reporters (usually cultural types, and thinly disguised agents of Chinese Intelligence). They had been vehemently demanding bodyguards to accompany them into Kosovo. I had told them that there was really very little danger, but they were not to be deterred. The Italian Colonel passing out the Press Passes grunted and allowed them to stew in their own juices. Wandering around looking for allies in their quest for personal protection, they had blundered into Jake, NOT an admirer of Communist China. Jake was up to the exchange!

Somehow, the conversation had gotten around to the subject of Cruise Missiles. They were telling Jake that they had it on good authority that the U.S. Cruise Missiles were terribly inaccurate. Preying on the then recent bombing of the Chinese Embassy, Jake looked at them with a completely innocent stare and said, "Well, it was good enough to take out the Chinese Embassy, wasn't it?" The Chinaman looked at Jake in horror and momentary disbelief. As Jake turned to leave, I could have sworn that I heard him say under his breath, "but it probably wouldn't have been nearly as accurate if we hadn't had a man on the inside!" We left two Chinese agents with their mouths hanging open. I wonder if the embassy personnel were purged? Heh, heh, heh...

We waited around Tirana for several days hoping for word from Colonel Brown, but to no avail. Since we had no contact phone number, we had to start our sea trip by ocean-going ferry back to Italy. As it turned out, Colonel Bob was still following leads in the Northern part of Kosovo and would reappear, Brown fashion, several weeks later. We were a bit concerned, but knowing the Colonel's ability to handle himself in sticky situations, we were not in a panic stricken state.

Not having anticipated our long separation, we were running a bit short on ready cash, and our airline reservations in Rome were rapidly approaching. Jake made a couple of cryptic calls for transportation from Tirana to Durrës where we were to catch the ferry. The trip was an overnight sojourn, crossing the Adriatic to the Italian port of Bari. From Bari the train wound across the Italian Boot past Naples, turning north towards Rome. Ah Rome, "The Eternal City." We were not prepared for what was to come!

We knew that we were operating on limited capital, but after eating we pooled our remaining "jing" only to find that lodgings were gonna' be sparse. Rome is one expensive joint! Just outside the railroad terminal in Rome, we were accosted by a young lady hawking special prices on local lodging. Hummm... We told her what we had to spend. She told us she had JUST the thing that would fit our budget. We followed her with anticipation of a decent night's rest in a nice hotel. We should have known better.

Walking up the street towards the hotel we had used on our way to Albania, it appeared that our new digs were at least located in a nice neighborhood! We suddenly took a hard left down a side street. Lots of bright lights, but no obvious hotels. Suddenly the gal points up to a sign advertising the "*Chica-Chica Boom Club*"! Uh Oh - The hotel wasn't a roach motel, but the furnishings seemed to be early Victorian. Checking at the front desk, the clerk indicated that we could rent the room for as long as we wanted... from an hour up! Hummm...

A number of questions to the desk clerk revealed that the "Chica-Chica Boom Club" didn't have any twin singles, just single rooms with one double bed. The elevators were so small that it was a real squeeze for two people. We wondered when they built this place. While the sheets were clean, I got the definite feeling that we were "hot racking" our assigned room. I was afraid to open the door, lest I find a line outside waiting for their turn.

"Hey Jake, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah, no question about it! Where I come from they burn red lights in front of a place like this! This is a high class whore house!"

A Roman "House of Ill Repute?" How was this gonna' read on the after action report? And only ONE double bed! Now Jake was a nice guy, but ...

"Hey Jake, ya' wanna' flip for the bed?"

"Naw, just spread your sleeping bag out on the bed, and I'll do the same."

"Jake, you don't roll around in your sleep a bunch do ya?"

"Not usually, but look at it like this - we've both got neck knives, right?"

Neck knives? Dear Allah! How's this one gonna' read? North Idaho adventurer stabbed in male lover's tryst in Roman Sporting House... Wonder how they did this in the old West when the Gold Camps were filled to overflowing? My appreciation for western history was getting a whole new perspective!

We stowed our gear, squeezed into the little itty-bitty elevator, and went out into the street to check out Rome after dark. By pure chance we found Harry, who had flown back to Rome in style and was hanging his hat in one of the better hotels in town. I made lots of mental notes to myself.

With a day to kill until our plane departed for the States, we set out on a foot tour of Rome. We hit everything, from the Coliseum, to the Roman Forum, to the Vatican. We broke bread with Harry that evening and talked over the trip. Was it worth it? No question about it! My eyes were opened once more to man's continual inhumanity to man, and I had achieved a new appreciation for the situation in the Balkans.

I might have remained a closet isolationist if Milosevic's ethnic assassination squads just hadn't killed the dogs.

ROC