

# Changing the Narrative. The humanitarian role of the British Army (UNPROFOR) Bosnia



Provided by  
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In September 2022 I was delighted to bring eight charitable souls to Bosnia to cycle from Sarajevo to the southern Bosnian town of Gorazde. This adventure was to raise funds for the charity I had established in 2012, Gorazde Children's Foundation ([www.gcfbosnia.org](http://www.gcfbosnia.org)).



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The charity's aim is to raise monies for the primary school in the town, to give hope, purpose, and a better future to its children. In doing so, it honours the past and in remembrance, the six soldiers that gave their lives on United Nations service as part of the British Army's operational deployment, under the code name Operation Grapple, 1994 – 1995.

In September 1994 I was a young captain in the British Army and was privileged to be given the opportunity to join fellow officers in leading soldiers of our infantry battalion into Bosnia; an experience I will be forever grateful for. Throughout the late, hazy summer days of 1994, into autumn where the hills and valleys that surrounded the town became rich in colour with the seasonal fall, to the snow-capped peaks of winter and to early spring 1995 and new life beyond, I found myself patrolling the mountains as part of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).

It was a six-month period that would leave an indelible mark, adding a purpose and colour that would be stitched into my life's tapestry.

When I reflect on my time in Bosnia, an enduring memory is the deep-rooted feeling that we were hamstrung in what we could do, that the UN mandate under which we operated frustrated the impact we could have made; that we were but sightseers on others' tragedy.

My feeling was not unique, as through the years that have passed, I know many of my comrades felt the same. This haplessness was exacerbated by history quickly and rightly noting the failure of the UN mission in Bosnia, encapsulated by the massacre that the UN bore witness and responsibility in Srebrenica.

It is not surprising the feeling towards the UN in Bosnia, for those that lived through the genocide and the generations that have followed and listened to their parents and grandparents, is that the UN were accountable for this failure and other travesties that could have been avoided.

My time spent in Bosnia over the past 25 years has afforded me opportunities to speak to those from all generations and has gifted me many friends. Through on-going conversations there has been a growing understanding between us that Bosnians could, and I feel passionately should, differentiate between the failure of the United Nations and the perceived unwillingness of the foreign soldiers that made up UNPROFOR to act in accordance with humanity and prevent death and suffering.

The politicians and the bureaucrats of the world and the UN failed, but the foreign soldiers on the ground should not be found accountable or responsible for these policy and political failings.

I witnessed our soldiers act with professionalism, stretching the interpretation of the UN rules of engagement to do what they could. They were compassionate, had charity and deployed their ingenuity to support the town's people and children in a humanitarian capacity within the limits of inadequate resources.

[gcfbosnia.org](http://gcfbosnia.org)

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**This feeling was far better articulated in General Sir Michael Rose's (Commander UNPROFOR, Bosnia) foreword to my book *Donkey Mail and Bully Beef*:**

*"By 1994, the United Nations deployed over 23,000 young peacekeepers to Bosnia in order to deliver aid to 2.7 million people caught up in the region's three-sided civil war.*

*The majority of these peacekeepers were volunteers who believed that it was their duty to help others, no matter how risky the mission. Sadly, many of them were killed or injured during the three-year period for which the war lasted, of whom seventy-two were British.*

*However, their deaths were not in vain as the UN presence in Bosnia undoubtedly prevented the country from being overrun by the Serbs and, of course, without the humanitarian aid that was delivered, many more thousands of Bosnians from all sides of the conflict would have perished through hunger or disease.*

*Following UN-brokered deals, the war did not end sooner because the USA - tacitly supported by NATO - armed the Bosnian Muslims in direct contravention of the UN Security Council resolutions that the international community had been signed up to in 1992 at the start of the war.*

*This illegal arming of the Bosnian Muslims undoubtedly derailed the efforts of the UN to bring about peace. It caused a prolongation of the war and thereby the suffering of the people of Bosnia, and without any significant territorial gain for the state of Bosnia.*

*It was a clear betrayal, of not only the UN peacekeepers and the people of Bosnia, but also of the international convention. It is also clear that if the USA had allowed President Izetbegovic to sign up to the Owen-Stoltenberg peace plan in July 1994, the Srebrenica massacre would never have happened.*

*This book serves as a useful reminder of the confusion, difficulties and dangers faced by those brave soldiers serving in the UN mission in Bosnia, at a time when the international community lacked strategic coherence. It also serves as a moving testimony to the four British soldiers who died whilst serving with the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire, and Wiltshire Regiment (RGBW) in 1994"*



On patrol in a Saxon armoured personnel carrier



The memorials to Ben Hinton and Fergus Rennie, high above the town of Gorazde



Early morning view from the memorial site

On the final day of my September 2022 visit, back in Sarajevo, I happened upon a museum in a side street near the Old Town, the Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992 – 1995.

Entering the museum, I was unsure what to expect. It was brutal in its presentation of the cruelty, callousness, inhumaneness that had been showered onto the Bosnian people during the war. Each room had you wanting to move through quickly, but you found yourself entrenched, captivated, reading, rereading, in the hope perhaps at the final reading what you had read would change. It was unashamedly laying before you inhumanity.

It simultaneously made me feel proud for what we had done but angered at what we failed to do (as UNPROFOR). Towards its end you are confronted by a wall dedicated to Srebrenica, and a leading headline 'The failure of the United Nations'.

At its reception I gave thanks for the work they had done in bringing this museum to being, to be responded to in perfect English by one of the two founders of the museum. We found common ground quickly and she listened with enthusiasm about the charity's efforts.

Soon afterwards I found myself with coffee in hand, talking to her co-founder Suada, a former colonel in the Bosnian Army. Suada agreed with my thoughts regarding the role of the UN and that of the soldiers tasked to act within its policies. We parted with a meaningful handshake, and a promise that a few of my books would be sent to be sold with the monies to go to the museum. Suada left me with an open invitation that he would happily help me if he could in my efforts.



A few days later I tip-tapped an email to Suada:

*"It was great to meet you and many congratulations on your museum, it is impactful, meaningful and should be visited by all that come to see your beautiful country. What happened in recent history must not be lost in the mists of time.*

*As we parted, you kindly offered to help me in my efforts in Bosnia. Since 1992, 59 British soldiers have lost their lives on UN duty in Bosnia, and countless more have been injured on service in a foreign land in the name of peace. During their time, and mine in Gorazde, we did what we could from a humanitarian perspective to help. In my own case the legacy is alive today in what I am doing for the school in Gorazde ([www.gcfbosnia.org](http://www.gcfbosnia.org)). This is linked to the remembrance of the six British soldiers that gave their lives on UN duty in Gorazde 1994 – 1995 and all those that served on peacekeeping operations in the city.*

*As we chatted over coffee, the many failures of the UN mission in Bosnia are not questioned, and the people of Bosnia have justification to hold this view. The failure, however, to recognise the humanitarian work undertaken by foreign soldiers deployed to Bosnia as part of UNPROFOR is something I feel passionately about and feel there exists a need to provide a perspective on this contribution and to recognise the good done by so many. Here, therefore, is what you could do for me:*

*Would you consider having a small display in your museum for the British Army's contributions (and specifically, our young soldiers) as part of UNPROFOR, focused on the humanitarian work undertaken, presenting a positive perspective? In doing so, I feel the loss of comrades, the mental scars carried by many, the service given by young British soldiers sent to a foreign land will perhaps provide a renewed sense of purpose and pride in what was achieved despite the UN, rather than because of it.*

*If this request could be accommodated, I am confident I can provide British Army uniforms, equipment, and many photographs. I write in hope, and not with expectation."*

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### Within 24 hours I had a reply:

*“Dearest Maurice, it was great to meet you too. We are very grateful and pleasantly surprised by your email, and more so the enthusiasm you have for our country to help us. We would welcome the opportunity to add the presentation as you have outlined at our museum, indeed we would be extremely grateful for your help to ensure we can do so.*

*The role of the British army throughout the Bosnian conflict has been remembered for the humanitarian work, undertaken in arduous conditions. This ran alongside the role they sought to play to provide security and protection. Without doubt we built a level of trust and respect for the British army.*

*I saw many, many humanitarian aid convoys entering Bosnia and Herzegovina and how the British army protected and then dispersed these important convoys and rations to my people. The private soldiers on the ground built relationships with us. They were professional but always friendly, forging friendships and showing compassion, especially for the plight of our children. Their medical help will always be remembered, as will their undoubted professionalism as one of the best equipped and trained forces in the world.*

*I am sure if their mandate was different, if the United Nations had not restricted them so heavily, they would have provided far more help and protection. I know from those I spoke to then and now this was their wish, but we are thankful still for all they did.”*

**Suada**, Museum Founder and former Colonel, BiH Army.

## Museum of Crimes Against Humanity And Genocide 1992 - 1995

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



I was overwhelmed with this response, and with this possibility, came a determination to make it happen. However, time is of the essence, as on 29 April 2023, a new memorial to the six fallen British soldiers will be unveiled in Gorazde in the very near future. Our aim is to get 50 old comrades who served in Gorazde to Bosnia to attend, staying initially in Sarajevo.

My hope is we can encourage this cohort to visit the museum before the opening of the memorial, and as they pass through its corridors, see the small presentation recognising their service and contribution.

We now concentrate our efforts to bring together 50 old comrades, and a team of riders to head to Bosnia in April 2023. We aim to raise sufficient funds to revamp the school's gymnasium, to be named The Queen Elizabeth Hall. A fitting tribute to those old comrades who referred to Her Majesty as 'the boss', to whom they swore allegiance.

For more information, contact [info@gcfbosnia.org](mailto:info@gcfbosnia.org)



Visit their website by [clicking here](#)

[gcfbosnia.org](http://gcfbosnia.org)

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