

# The Preparation of **Soldiers** for a Peace-supporting Mission

*Continuing our debate about how training can prepare for dealing with other cultures, Coyote wanted to know how soldiers are prepared for a peace-supporting mission. How different is their training from a preparation of, for example, volunteers in a European Voluntary Service programme?*

by Charly Pauwels



My name is Charly Pauwels and I'm a Belgian Army major. For the moment, I'm the deputy commander of the Belgian reconnaissance battalion that has been designated to prepare for a peace-supporting mission in Kosovo. In some of my previous postings, I've been involved very closely in the preparation and finally in the execution of two missions in former Yugoslavia. So, I took part in the UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) and the UNTAES (United Nations Transitional Administration for East-Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem) missions. During those missions I experienced personally that not only the military skills of our soldiers were important.

I do not have the intention to describe the complete instruction and training of our soldiers who will take part at a humanitarian mission abroad. Much more I prefer to emphasise the non-military preparation of our personnel.

At the very beginning of the conflict in former Yugoslavia, seminars on different political and military levels were put together. They had as an objective to estimate the possible influences of this conflict for our society. Very soon it turned out that Europe had to react to stabilise the situation in its backyard because this conflict expanded so quickly, some dared to talk about a third world war. It hasn't come that far, but for the moment the conflict is still going on. The cultural and historical differences among all parties involved living on in the former Yugoslavian territory are so huge that peace seems impossible. It is very important that a soldier taking part in a mission in a foreign, often unknown country, is aware of the existing

differences between the warring factions so that he can act as a peace-bringer instead of unconsciously worsening the situation.

The military part of the UN mission in Croatia was under Belgian command and ended successfully thanks to the effort of well trained soldiers, coming from all over the world. The most urgent task was to stop the hostilities in order to create a non-violent atmosphere to start the peace-process. To realise this, a demilitarised zone was created in order to separate the conflicting parties. Then soldiers and civilians were disarmed and the military organisation was disbanded. Very soon after that, refugees and displaced persons started returning to their homes and elections were organised. According to the latest information the situation is actually almost completely normalised. All soldiers involved in the operation, regardless of their rank, gained a lot of experience. They have learned in very difficult circumstances to manage a conflict that wasn't theirs. They have learned to be neutral and diplomatic lifesavers without considering the nationality, language and religion of the inhabitants.

This experience will be of great help in the preparation and execution of future peace supporting operations.

Recently the Belgian government reacted positively on NATO's request to send troops to Kosovo. Belgian soldiers will take part in this huge military organisation and will look for the restoration of peace in this region. This mission was baptised KFOR (Kosovo FORce).





The Belgian battalion is, among others, composed of specialised detachments of infantry, cavalry, reconnaissance, pioneer and logistic units. The personnel of these units have to be trained in different specific domains. Each unit has, according to its specialisation, its own instruction and training programme but a lot of lessons are common for each member of the battalion.

In general, although the mandate for each mission can be different, lessons are given in the next following domains: conflict prevention, peace keeping, humanitarian aid, peace enforcement and peace building.

Let me stress the non-military (mental) preparation of our personnel.

At battalion level and higher there are personnel who are responsible for gathering information on the future areas of action.

A general orientation, related to

- ▷ geography (relief, vegetation, hydrography),
- ▷ territorial organisation (communities, districts, provinces),
- ▷ population (numbers, composition),
- ▷ economy (agriculture, energy, soil exploitation),
- ▷ social services, history (of the country, of the conflict, actual situation),
- ▷ spoken languages (Serbian, Albanian, ...),
- ▷ religion (Catholic, Orthodox, Islam),
- ▷ habits, taboos and ethnic contrasts

is used to familiarise our personnel with the country and its population.

Not every soldier needs to have a thorough knowledge in all of these domains. For most of them, general information is sufficient to understand in what game they are going to play. For a few though, it is more important to have a

larger knowledge in all of the above mentioned domains. Negotiators and the key personnel of the units for instance, have to be aware of the political and military framework of the country. Each battalion disposes of several liaison officers (= negotiators on battalion level) whose mission it is to keep and stay in contact with each faction in civilian and military affairs and to negotiate at their units level in case of problems or incidents. For them it is also useful to know the people they work with. "Knowledge makes powerful" is an expression that explains all. The more you know the stronger you are. In order to achieve this, courses and lectures in "techniques of negotiating" are organised.

To make it easier for our soldiers in mission, a code of conduct is imposed. Most of the rules given are of course the same for each mission but some of them depend on the culture they will be dropped in.

Some examples are:

- The attitude of our men towards the local women. In some cultures it can be experienced as a gross insult when a foreign man looks at a local girl. Leaving on a mission with young men and women, who are far away from home for a longer period, is for some not easy. The past gives enough examples to show what I mean. How many soldiers of the different armies that occupied Germany after the Second World War didn't have a relationship with German girls? The same happened with our soldiers during the missions in Croatia. Although this is very human, it can cause severe problems. Can one be neutral if he has a relationship with a girl from the nation he ►►

#### Picture

A Serbian sign.

This picture was taken in 1993 at the entrance of a Croatian village, completely destroyed by Serbs. Do not immediately judge the act but try first to understand the reason



**... conflict  
prevention, peace  
keeping,  
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... Do not immediately judge an act when you don't know its background ...



#### Picture

Two religions (in Bosnia). Understanding each other makes it possible to live together in peace

has to control? In order to avoid these kinds of situations it is most of the time forbidden for our soldiers to have any close contacts with the local people.

- The attitude of our military women towards local men. There are some cultures where women occupy an inferior place in their community and where it is not accepted when a woman possesses some power. We have to avoid that women operate alone and to make sure that male colleagues always accompany them. Our women are thought to understand the possible reactions.
- The attitude towards children is not to be neglected. The definition of what a child is seems to be for some nations different from what we think it should be. As for most countries in the world, soldiers have to be at least 18 years old. In some of the central African countries this is not always the case. As soon as a person, regardless of his/her age, can carry a rifle, he can be enlisted. It happened in Somalia that a soldier came face to face with what we call a child. That so-called innocent child, who, just by being a child, easily captured our soldier's heart, managed to infiltrate in our compounds and when it didn't get what it wanted, became a dangerous fighter, ready to use a hidden weapon. Nothing serious happened but valuable lessons have been learned.
- The possession of pornographic material is in some strict Moslem countries forbidden by law and has to be excluded for some missions. Our soldiers have to understand that possessing such material can cause problems. The easiest

way to avoid any incident is to forbid anything that can shock others.

- In some cultures, the drinking of alcoholic beverages is completely forbidden and in others it can be a way to show their hospitality and, refusing a drink, can be an insult.
- Etc...

Based on my own experiences, I have tried to explain that not only knowing your job is enough to do it right. The knowledge of the framework you have to work in is as important. I advise every young man and woman to be open to other cultures and to try to understand them without comparing them with their own culture. This comparison, in order to understand why the other one does something completely different than you do, will not make you wiser. Do not immediately judge an act when you don't know its background. The reason, why nation X does something, is, for a lot of people, not important when they are looking at the way this nation acts. When you are designated to work with that nation, knowing their reasons will make it easier to do your job.

For all those leaving for a mission in a foreign environment: read a lot and talk with those who were there before you.

#### Good luck!

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