

Lester's little gift

Captain Paul B. Charlebois

The true meaning of the holiday season is most easily found when you spend it away from home. I spent Christmas 1999 in Bosnia-Herzegovina with approximately 1800 other Canadian peacekeepers, enforcing the Dayton Peace Accord of 1995.

Conflicts like civil wars have an amazing ability to steal from everything they come in contact with, and this was certainly true in our corner of Bosnia. Years of fighting had left the area around Velika Kladusa with many scars: poverty, mistrust and a decimated industrial base. The scars were reflected not only in burned-out buildings but also in the eyes of those who had witnessed what hatred can do.

It is only right that Canada participates in these peacekeeping efforts because it was one of our own who came up with the idea of using soldiers for peace instead of war. Many doubted Lester Pearson when he proposed the concept of soldiers as peacekeepers in the 1950s, and some still do. However, the people in our part of Bosnia did not. If we had not been there, we were told, the fighting would have continued.

Sitting in my small office, I tried to focus on what the holidays truly meant. By then, many of us were used to being away from home. In my group in Bosnia, some soldiers were logging their fifth peacekeeping tour; I was on my second in less than a year.

Life in Bosnia wasn't that bad, compared with the conditions facing those around us. Our camp was now more than 3 years old, and we were warm, had reliable electricity and were well fed. In fact, all we would be missing were our families. However, as much as you prepare for it, being away at Christmas is still difficult — and being surrounded by the bleak reminders of war does not make it any easier.

A number of parties were organized at our camp. Outside our gates, the predominantly Muslim population was busy preparing for their own holiday season, although the preparations were far more modest than ours. We discovered that a celebration has a way of getting everyone involved. Local school children were brought in for a Christmas party and dance recital, and one of my heftier medics was drafted into the role of St. Nick. Gifts and giving were the order of the day,



and children's laughter helped to take the edge off the distance from home.

Through all this, work continued. We were the main support unit for all Canadian units in Bosnia, and supplies had to get through along the treacherous roads of northern Bosnia. Although fighting had ceased, poor highways and

rocky terrain made travel hazardous. A few days earlier, 2 British soldiers died because of the hazardous conditions on a stretch of road frequently travelled by Canadian convoys.

On the medical front, we were kept busy treating the usual day-to-day ailments and counselling troops who were finding the holidays a little too much to bear. We tried to remember to bring gifts along on our weekly visit to the local civilian clinic we ran. It was here that we came face to face with the consequences of war. The young women, who no longer looked young, were a living reminder of war's toll. Another reminder came from the family who brought their son to see if we could obtain a pneumatic cushion to prevent ulcers in his powerless legs. A quick fax to the American supplier resulted in a donated cushion. The mother's tears were gratitude enough.

Christmas Day dawned cool, but the main building was warm with the smells of the feast to come. I made a quick 15-minute call to my parents in Halifax. They, too, had become accustomed to me not being there, part of a collective

understanding shared by many families across Canada that day.

It is military tradition that senior members serve the junior ranks at Christmas dinner, so I donned my serving hat and prepared to bring dinner to my medics. As we celebrated, I reflected. This was to be a special holiday. But why? Was it the sense of fulfillment I found in helping the local community? Was it the people I had come to respect as we faced the same day-to-day challenges? None of these seem to be able to fully explain why this Yuletide was different from all the rest.

As I walked back to my room it was quiet, except for the dull roar of the party going on inside. The hills around our camp were silhouetted by the moon. And then it dawned on me. What made the season special was the fact that Lester Pearson's gift to mankind was still being delivered by Canadians in all corners of the world. Peace.

Captain Charlebois was medical officer with the Canadian National Support Element in Bosnia-Herzegovina from August 1999 to March 2000.