

draft #1

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
COLUMN FOR PUBLICATION MARCH 28, 1996
TALKING IT OVER/CREATORS SYNDICATE

Camp Bedrock is an appropriately named U.S. Army outpost south of Tuzla in Bosnia. Before I arrived there by helicopter earlier this week to see some of our troops, I had a hard time imagining what life must be like for the American men and women serving as part of the NATO peacekeeping effort in the former Yugoslavia.

Then I visited the soldiers.

Never mind that the camp is surrounded by rock and mud and the weather has been cold, foggy and rainy almost every day. Never mind that breakfast, lunch and dinner often come in plastic packages. And never mind that "home" is a makeshift green tent pitched on a hilltop thousands of miles from family and friends.

The 20,000 American troops in Bosnia seem to understand the larger purpose of their being there. Nearly every soldier I met -- from officers to enlistees to the men and women I visited in Camp Bedrock's MASH unit -- told me that ^{Serving}~~being~~ in Bosnia for a few months has made them appreciate how important their mission is.

As one artillery officer who patrols the Bosnian countryside explained to me, "When we came here more than two months ago, we never saw kids anywhere. The schools were empty. Now the schools are full and we see kids playing outside."

Children do seem to offer the best reminder of why the peace-keeping mission in Bosnia is so important, not just for the Bosnian people, but for Americans too.

The day before I left for Bosnia I met a group of American seventh-graders at the Baumholder Army Base high school in Germany. Many of their parents have been deployed in Bosnia at outposts like Camp Bedrock and Camp Alicia, the two remote areas I visited.

For the past few months these children have been writing down their thoughts and feelings in journals, poems, and letters to Bosnian pen pals at a school in Tuzla. Most of them talk about how sad and frightening it was when their father or mother had to leave the family to go to a place where tens of thousands of people had died in war.

"For the first time in my life, I felt pure fear," an eloquent student named Deanna Brauer wrote. "I couldn't get past my anxiety."

Then she and her classmates began reading letters from their Bosnian counterparts -- letters describing what life is like when water and food run out, snipers are shooting around the clock and you have to flee your home and live in a bomb shelter for weeks at a time.

Letter after letter thanked the Americans for "sending" their parents to help bring peace to Bosnia.

"It was then that everything became clear to me," Deanna's journal said. "My dad was desperately needed by someone else.

Though the fear still lingered, I was out of the dark. I understood why he had to leave."

As difficult as the deployment is for American service members and their families, visiting the outposts in Bosnia leaves no doubt that their sacrifices are helping restore peace and build bridges between people. In Bosnia, our military power is enhancing our interests and upholding our moral values. Our military -- made up of men and women of all races, creeds, and ethnic backgrounds -- is itself an example for Bosnia of how people of different cultures can work together on a common enterprise.

I was glad to see that many of our troops recognize the profound impact they are having. They told me that they are not just rebuilding a country in Bosnia, they are helping rebuild the human spirit.

"Before we came it was hard to fathom what was going on here," said a lieutenant I met at Camp Alicia, a U.S. Army outpost near the front line of some of the war's worst fighting. "Then you go out in the villages and see all the damage. You see roofs blown off of houses. You see whole neighborhoods that were completely bombed out. You see people who had to survive for years with hardly any food to eat or water to drink.

"But now, wherever we go, the kids seem happy. They wave at us and smile. To me, that's reason enough to be here."

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[insert quote here]

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The 20,000 American troops in Bosnia seem to understand the larger purpose of their being there. Nearly every soldier I met -- from officers to enlistees to the men and women I visited in Camp Bedrock's MASH unit -- told me that whatever initial doubts they had about the mission in Bosnia had given way to pride about the job they are doing.

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