

# Briton clears path through fog of Bosnia's war

The Times, 28th August 1993 (Front page)

by Richard Beeston (*Overseas News*)

THE old, borrowed London ambulance looked out of place and vulnerable as Sally Becker steered it uncertainly across what had once been Mostar's airport runway but today is one of the city's most notorious frontlines. As any veteran of Bosnia's civil war will confirm, snipers rarely respect the neutrality of civilian casualties, but this time out of good luck and careful diplomacy the guns did fall silent long enough to allow the slow-moving convoy of two ambulances and four Jeeps, carrying journalists, across the no man's land.

The bumpy ride, sometimes over dirt tracks, did take its toll and occasionally a cry of pain went up from Selma Handzar, 10, who lost an arm and suffered shrapnel wounds when an artillery round exploded in a sandbagged playground. The explosion also mutilated her brother Mirza, the youngest evacuee, who nevertheless managed a smile as he was carried in a stretcher into the safety of the Spanish peacekeepers' battalion headquarters at Medugorje. From there the children will be evacuated to Zagreb and eventually third countries. The saving of five young lives from Mostar will certainly not alter the course of conflict, a fact confirmed only minutes before the evacuation began yesterday morning when two more children were admitted to the overcrowded intensive care unit, suffering from shrapnel wounds from a tank shell explosion. Nevertheless Ms Becker's success story must rate as one of the most extraordinary episodes of individual human victory over the misery of the civil war in the former Yugoslav republic. It is an achievement made even more poignant by the continued inability of the trapped UN convoy to extricate itself through negotiation from Mostar's angry demonstrators.

"My biggest hope is that this operation will open up the channels and we will be able to evacuate all injured children from every side of the war," said Ms Becker, 33, an artist from Brighton. She first became interested in helping victims in the Bosnian war when she volunteered to drive aid convoys into the area. "I do not belong to any charity, I do not even have an office, just the determination to help these people," she said.

Certainly her dedication and instinctive understanding of the twisted logic of the Balkans have served her well. Although from the start she was motivated by wanting to help an injured, but fatally wounded, Bosnian Muslim boy trapped on the besieged eastern half of Mostar, she at first concentrated her efforts on gaining the trust of the Bosnian Croats on the western side of the city, where she now lives.

"I wanted to make it clear from the beginning that I am not here to take sides, and that I want to help children from all backgrounds who need to be rescued," she said, adding that she hoped to concentrate her efforts next time on injured Bosnian Croat children trapped in central Bosnia at the makeshift hospital at Nova Bila.

Her tactic and the publicity surrounding her success appear to have worked so well that the desperate 162 UN military and aid workers still trapped in Mostar, with no end in sight to the stalemate, turned to the British volunteer in the hope that their mile-long convoy of armoured personnel carriers and lorries might somehow be tacked on to the back of her two-ambulance operation. The UN's desperate situation in Mostar, where Muslim demonstrators are now insisting that the column will only be allowed to leave after the besieged enclave is declared a UN safe area patrolled by international peacekeepers, is symptomatic of the overall loss of credibility in the organisation by Bosnian Croats, Muslims and Serbs alike.

28th August 1993 (Copyright © The Times 1993)

[Back to News Archive](#)