

Air Force engineers build operating facilities for US peacekeeping forces deploying to Bosnia.

RED HORSE of the Balkans

By Bill Gertz

WITHOUT fanfare, the Air Force carried out a sizable ground operation in the Balkans this winter, helping the Army set up a base of operations at the American sector headquarters in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The biggest mission entailed rapid construction of huge tent cities at Tuzla airfield—once a MiG fighter base—and other areas in order to house thousands of soldiers pouring in from staging areas in Hungary and Croatia.

These enormous compounds of wood-frame tents began springing up in December at Tuzla airfield and two adjacent areas known as Tuzla East and Tuzla West. Construction was the work of USAF's 823d Civil Engineering Squadron, better known by the acronym RED HORSE (Rapid Engineer Deployable, Heavy Operational Repair Squadron, Engineer).

"It's different from what we're used to," reported Col. Susanne M. Waylett, RED HORSE commander and the first woman to hold that position. "We've operated primarily in southwest Asia. We're very accustomed to operating in the heat but not in the cold."

In the initial phase of NATO's



USAF photo by MSgt. Rose A. Reynolds

Even in an Air Force better known for airborne lasers, advanced fighters, and satellites, there is still a place for hammers, nails, and elbow grease. RED HORSE personnel arrived early in Bosnia-Herzegovina and worked around the clock to make sure that arriving troops would have a dry, warm place to sleep.

Operation Joint Endeavor, the brutal Balkan winter featured not only breathtaking cold but also alternating periods of rain, snow, and ice. At times, an ocean of mud encased Tuzla, which has served as the logistic hub for Task Force Eagle, the name used by the US-led multinational force comprising the US Army's 1st Armored Division and units made up of Turkish, Scandinavian, Baltic, and Russian troops.



Photo by Tracy A. Woodward

Colonel Waylett, wearing a Kevlar helmet tightly cinched under her chin and a standard-issue 9-mm Beretta pistol strapped around her flak vest, took time out from the job one day to talk about the mission, while outside, on the grounds of Tent City One, members of RED HORSE sawed and hammered away.

“Almost Miraculous”

“I feel the troops have adapted very, very well,” said the Colonel. “The productivity that we’ve demonstrated, considering the weather conditions, is almost miraculous.” One reason for this, Colonel Waylett explained, was motivation to complete the job—something not felt to the same degree by the ground troops stationed in the country. “They’re here for a year,” she said of the soldiers. “When we’re finished building their base camps, we go home. We know the faster we get finished, the faster they get into good billets, and the faster we can go do other things for other customers.”

The 823d RED HORSE Squadron, whose home station is Hurlburt Field, Fla., deployed about 250 troops to the Balkans. In their first two months

in the country, they built several tent cities at Tuzla airfield and moved on to three other locations, where tents were going up as quickly as Air Force transport aircraft could deliver construction materials. By February, the Air Force had stationed about 550 troops in Bosnia, about half of them RED HORSE members. The rest served as air traffic controllers, air-lift ground personnel, communications specialists, engineers, and the like.

Getting Tuzla’s operating surfaces into shape proved easier than many had expected. Capt. Anthony Davit, civil engineer with the 4100th Air Base Group (Provisional), said the runways and taxiways were in good shape, with only a few shallow pot-holes, which were easily repaired with cold-patch asphalt. However, the lights presented a greater problem. The Captain said that they had to replace fixtures and bulbs for the runway lights and contract with the Tuzla Electric Co. to repair extensive breaks in the taxiway lighting cables.

By December 20, the day NATO officially took over the Balkan peace-keeping operation, USAF had deposit-

ed at the Tuzla base seventy-three airmen and all of the communications gear needed for flight operations. Flight operations were being directed from an old tower whose windows were crisscrossed with tape. The tower’s prior occupants, Bosnian government forces, believed the tape would protect controllers from a shell blast.

After the Army determined it needed help setting up tent cities, RED HORSE was called in and went to work building the tents. Col. Neal Patton, 4100th Air Base Group (Provisional) commander, is in charge of Air Force operations at Tuzla and arrived with combat air controllers December 6 and began working with the departing United Nations troops to prepare for the airlift.

It was common to see ground crews running out of tents by the airstrip to greet the arriving cargo aircraft. Transports kept their engines running while unloading and took off as soon as their cargo was moved off with the help of front loaders and other heavy cargo-handling equipment.

By February 1, USAF had landed more than 700 transport aircraft into

Tuzla, mostly C-130s, C-141s, and C-17s.

Blanketing the Marshes

Pitching tents in Bosnia was not easy. CMSgt. Ricardo D. Garcia, enlisted manager of the RED HORSE advance team, explained that before the tent cities could be built on the marshy airfield areas the ground had to be covered with special "geo-textile" fabric blankets, which were then covered with eight to ten inches of gravel. The blankets separated the gravel from the mud but allowed drainage. Otherwise, the gravel would have just sunk into the mud, said Sergeant Garcia.

RED HORSE units were first established during the Vietnam War. They built their first facilities at Bien Hoa AB, South Vietnam. During the Persian Gulf War, the 823d RED



Photos by Tracy A. Woodward

The deploying RED HORSE personnel and their equipment arrived mostly in C-130s, C-141s, and C-17s (above, refueling from a KC-135). An in-demand asset, RED HORSE engineers have recently spent up to 280 days per year traveling.



Col. Susanne M. Waylett commands the 823d Civil Engineering Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Fla. Before battling the cold and mud of the Balkans, the 823d faced vastly different challenges in Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Haiti.

HORSE built an entire air base in Saudi Arabia. The unit also built 2.4 miles of revetments in Mogadishu, Somalia, to protect US aircraft during the humanitarian mission there. And many of the "Horsemen" of the 823d finished military construction projects in Haiti around the end of November, just in time to begin preparing for deployment to Bosnia.

RED HORSE members are trained for heavy engineering operations and boast of their ability to launch twelve-person teams to remote or hostile

locations within twelve hours of a "go" order. Teams with ninety-four persons and 500 tons of equipment can be on the ground within forty-eight hours. Within six days, the full squadron of nearly 300 men and women and 1,100 tons of equipment can be deployed.

Their missions include base-camp construction (as in Tuzla), rapid runway repair, airfield lighting and installation, barrier and revetment construction, well drilling, and concrete and asphalt construction.

The first RED HORSE personnel arrived in Tuzla on Christmas Eve. "It was the first year I missed Christmas at home," said Capt. George Forbes, of Warrenton, Va. "It pretty much sucked."

But overall, the Captain, a civil engineering graduate of Virginia Tech, views the operation as "a good mission."

"We're helping thousands of troops in a short time, and the pace doesn't give you any time to think about home."

Captain Forbes, who has spent as many as 280 days a year traveling on construction projects, is part of a twelve-member RED HORSE survey team that conducted soil and water tests at Tuzla East and Tuzla West before the tent cities were built.

Captain Forbes noted that the military operation will leave the Bosnians with better roads, power-generation facilities, and water systems. Like many of the squad members, the Captain has a gung-ho attitude. "That's reflected in our motto," he said. "Can do. Will do. Have done."

Another key project for the squad is the construction of six facilities known as "Force Providers," the Army equivalent of the Air Force's Harvest Eagle rest and recreation centers.

Army plans called for the deployment, by mid-February, of 18,000 US troops to eastern Bosnia, spread out among about two dozen base

camps and the Tuzla complex. Several thousand more international troops also faced deployment in the US sectors.

For security reasons, soldiers and airmen have been forbidden to leave their bases. To improve morale in the many months of duty ahead, the Army asked the 823d to set up Force Provider centers at three forward operating bases in the Tuzla Valley.

In Good TEMPER

Two Force Provider centers will be set up at Tuzla East, two more at Tuzla West, and the last two at Lukavac. Each location will provide between 1,650 and 2,200 soldiers with morale, welfare, and recreation centers, medical facilities, chapels, laundry centers, and an exchange store in sixty-four-foot-square metal-frame tents. The TEMPER (Tent, Extendable Modular Personnel) tents come with central heating ducts.

The 823d is building the Force Providers at Tuzla East and West, while US Army engineers, along with the defense contracting firm Brown & Root, headquartered in Houston, Tex., are building the facilities at Lukavac.

The idea is to rotate soldiers through the facilities for rest and recreation. These tents are heated better than those in the field, and recreation facilities include basketball courts,



Photos by Tracy A. Woodward

Thanks to a donation from a grocery chain back in the States, more than 100 of the troops in the Balkans were able to enjoy a steak dinner—a real boost to morale for Army and Air Force personnel serving thousands of miles from home.

large-screen televisions, weight rooms, and dining rooms. Also on hand is what many troops long for: a hot shower.

“If there is one thing that everybody in this installation would like to have, it’s a hot shower,” said Colonel Waylett. “And we’re trying really hard to get as much . . . available as we can.”

RED HORSE’s first priority is to get the soldiers under cover in heated tents, and the next is to provide latrine and bathing facilities. RED

HORSE is also helping at the dining facility, where, at breakfast and dinner, one encounters the unusual sight of Russian paratroopers eating T-rations alongside American GIs.

Normally, RED HORSE is a self-sustaining outfit that provides its own food, medical technicians, and maintenance personnel. This time, however, the nearly 300 RED HORSE troops are eating with others at the main base facility. “Because we’re being supported out of the joint dining facility, I’ve brought in my services personnel, and we’re going to give them a hand in feeding the masses,” Colonel Waylett said.

The objective, she explained, is “supporting everybody who’s deployed in whatever way we can, whether it’s doing standard base-camp construction or providing [other types of] service that we have the capability to provide.”

No Privacy

Privacy for male and female troops in Bosnia often does not exist. Asked about segregating the sexes, Colonel Waylett replied, “Nope. Don’t believe in it.” She added, “Some units do, and some units are uncomfortable about integrating [men and women]. In RED HORSE, at least, no matter where we deploy, we do not segregate. It’s important because we operate as a team.”

In tents shared by men and women, changing clothes can be awkward.



Colonel Waylett is proud of the RED HORSE crew, who, despite the lack of the customary lead time to plan for the deployment, have “stepped forward and met every challenge.”



Whether in Tuzla, Bosnia (above), or Taszar, Hungary (below), USAF engineering personnel have performed with a productivity that Colonel Waylett termed "almost miraculous," considering the austere conditions they faced.

the largest airlift in Europe since World War II.

The heavy aircraft operations—C-5s, C-17s, C-141s, and C-130s that fly in and out around the clock—are under the command of the 615th Tanker Airlift Control Element. For the Hungarians, who view their support of Joint Endeavor as a foot in the door to joining the NATO Alliance, the huge airlift operation is impressive.

"In this airfield, we have never seen such a mass quantity of technology and equipment," said Hungarian Air Force Col. Zoltan Pinter, deputy commander of the active MiG-21 base at Taszar. "And we never thought there was enough room for all that."

About fifty of the MiG-21s based in Hungary had to be moved to another airfield during the deployment.

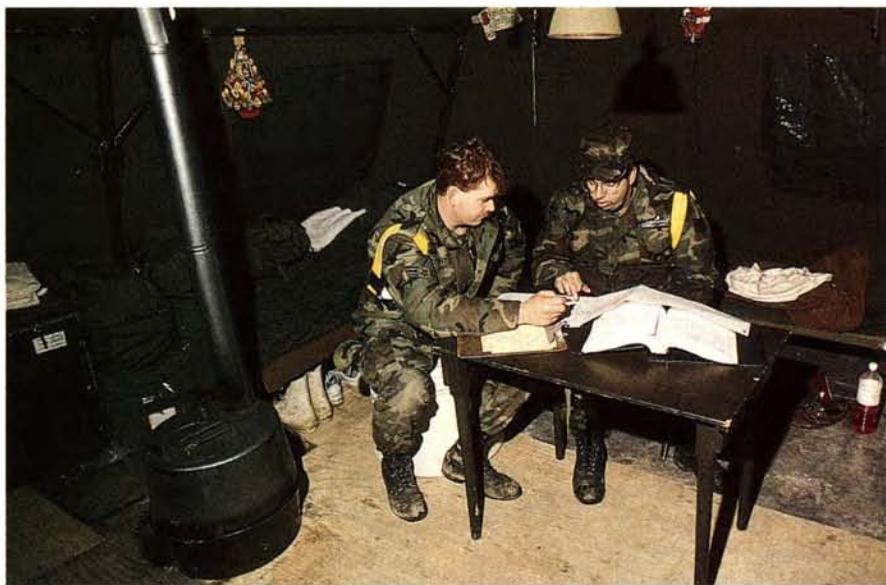
Male troops usually wait for females to leave the tent before changing clothes—but some don't.

SrA. Tony Carrender, of Destin, Fla., is a RED HORSE heating technician. He worries about millions of mines that have been planted or scattered throughout Bosnia, including areas around the airfield where he is working. "If it's not concrete, I don't walk on it," he said.

Casualties among the RED HORSE crew in the first six weeks of the deployment were limited to work-related injuries. One airman accidentally shot his foot with a pneumatic nail gun and had to have surgery at an Army medical facility before the Air Force evacuated him to the United States. A second airman suffered a painful shoulder separation when a load of materials shifted and pinned him to the inside of a metal shipping container.

The deployment is not a problem for SrA. Jason Arrowood, of Mount Airy, Md. "I don't mind being here, as long as we're doing some good," said the Airman, who orders materials for RED HORSE.

Colonel Waylett is proud of the RED HORSE crew. "They have stepped forward and met every challenge that has been presented. This has been far different from most of our deployments to do base-camp support because normally we have a lot of lead time to do planning, material ordering. This has not been that way, and



we still have to be able to produce the support that's necessary."

Another major Air Force logistics hub is located at the former Warsaw Pact MiG base in Taszar, Hungary, about 100 miles southwest of Budapest. The base, which is being rented by the US military for \$37,000 a month, has a sign at the entrance to the airstrip that says it is the site of

Several MiG-21s, covered in canvas, were lined up nearby, apparently used for spare parts. At the airfield one day, a MiG-29 arrived overhead and began flying aerobatic maneuvers over the American operation, prompting one Army lieutenant colonel to quip, "I guess they're trying to tell us it's time to leave." ■

Bill Gertz covers national security affairs for the Washington Times. In January, he spent more than three weeks with US forces in Bosnia. His most recent Air Force Magazine article, "The Air Force and Missile Defense," appeared in the February 1996 issue.