

ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: Col David Vassallo

Date: 22/3/15

Location: London

Total duration: 33.32

Interview by Naomi Hamill and summary by Kelly Bücher.

The interview plays as one long recording

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00.00	33.32	33.32	David Vassallo describes his role in Kosovo as a Consultant General Surgeon with the British Army, describing various cases he treated and how they were medically evacuated to Manchester, England. He talks about the friendships formed with the people he worked with in Kosovo. David also talks about returning to Kosovo for the Dedication of the Manchester Peace Park, ten years later.
Summary of interview content	<p><i>Col David Vassallo's family come from Malta. A member of the Royal Army Medical Corps he has served as a Consultant General Surgeon in theatres of war and in the NHS. A father of two girls the same ages as Saranda and Jehona Bogujevi, David was deeply affected by the plight of the wounded Bogujevci cousins when he met them during the Liberation of Kosovo in 1999. A pioneer of telemedicine, whilst in Bosnia and Kosovo he used a simple system to appeal for help: early digital camera, email, laptop and a satphone. With the support of Commander Medical and DFID, David evacuated the girls, and Besim Kadriu, to Manchester. David became involved in Manchester Aid to Kosovo, ran the 10K Great Manchester Run with the girls, and is a patron of the charity.</i></p> <p>00.00 David Vassallo describes currently being a Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corp in the British Army and by profession a Consultant General Surgeon. He says that in 1999 he was the General Surgeon attached to 22 Field Hospital which was deployed to Kosovo when NATO had to move into Kosovo to deal with the war. As a field hospital, they set up near Prishtina in a small, unused juvenile delinquent centre. They had a ward in a basketball court. Their accommodation was in padded cells, with bars at the end. During his time there, he kept a diary and every so often, during this tour, he'd refer to the diary to recount what was happening at the time.</p> <p>David Vassallo was using IT in June 1999, well before people were used to email and internet. Hardly anyone had digital cameras, either. He says that in the 1990's, he'd been to Bosnia three times as a surgeon with the forces and his very first tour was October 1994. There they had three wounded young children, blown up by artillery fire at a school. One of them in particular had had an injury to her subclavian vessels, the vessels in the chest, and needed specialist paediatric vascular help. He says that particular girl died on the operating table. This experience motivated him want to set up a link with our specialists back in England.</p> <p>(3:36) He was in Bosnia again in '97, and describes how he set up a simple telemedicine system. He'd found the first digital camera coming through England on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1997. He says he set up an email account and had got hold of a second hand satellite phone: here</p>			

he had the makings of a very simple communications system, a digital camera, email, laptop and a sat phone. He says they also had specialists back at the Royal Hospital Haslar, which was the main military hospital down on the south coast for the UK.

David Vassallo says that they were able to take photos of x-rays of wounds and transmit the images. He tested it the next year by going to Bosnia and other places, and the system worked. So, come 1999, when in Kosovo, he took this same system with him: an Olympus C1400, 1.4 megapixel camera, which cost, approximately £700, in those days and he had email access.

(04:30) He left Royal Hospital Haslar on Tuesday 29 June, for RAF Brice Norton where the plane left for Skopje in the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. On arrival at Skopje, he describes there being a helicopter ready to take him up to Prishtina in Kosovo.

The outgoing surgeon was on that helicopter and he took the same plane back to England.

(5:43) He says he found the ITU had 12 British military patients and 5 Albanians. Only a few hours after his arrival, 2 civilian Serbs came in having been gunned down by a gunman and he was operating 'til 5.45 that morning. He describes being inundated with patients, Albanian Kosovars, Serb Kosovars and some British military. They looked after them impartially. He says that he had to explain to the Kosovan interpreter that when you wear the Red Cross armband, and fly the Red Cross flag above a hospital, you must treat patients impartially. It doesn't matter whether they are military, civilian, enemy, friendly: a wounded human in war is no longer an enemy but a human being in need of help.

(07.20) He says he transferred medical information back and forth using email. He also describes the local hospital, Prishtina, having been abandoned by all its Serbian staff and there being booby traps inside.

(8:03) He says they quickly began receiving Kosovar patients, children, elderly, women: the innocent victims of war. He says that his emailing of pictures and medical information was very new both to the British and to the Americans (both civilian and military), and he had American colleagues who were very keen to find out how it was working in practice.

Their Orthopaedic Surgeon took the camera and went to the Prishtina hospital on the invitation of Dr. Tony Redmond from the Department for International Development (DYFID), to see how he could help out. He came back with a report saying what help was required, and they used their email link to transmit those messages as required. He says that they had the full co-operation of his Commanding Officer, of Commander Medical there and Director General Army Medical Services. He says that in two or three weeks they had received over 220 patients, quite a few admitted.

He says that they found that Prishtina Hospital had no Orthopaedic fixaters and there were

many people's with fractured legs which hadn't been adequately splinted. He therefore sent a request for a charity which was able to send out these fixaters and that was also funded by DFID.

He describes sending photos of one young Kosovar male to a specialist that he had previously worked with in Salford and the Hope Hospital for six months at a Specialist Colorectal unit with Nigel Scott, Gordon Carlson, Miles Irving. He says that he had high energy transfer wounds from Kalashnikov, through his abdomen, with faecal contents pouring out through holes in his abdomen, even after his preliminary surgery. He says that he needed the help of somewhere like the Total Parenteral Nutrition unit, set up at the Hope Hospital and a specialist colorectal surgery. He says within a few hours of sending the photos, they were trying to organise the evacuation.

(12:50) He describes performing surgery with a Lebanese surgeon who was in Kosovo with Médecins de Monde, although he had to leave mid surgery to attend an emergency at his own hospital, leaving the other surgeon to complete the procedure alone. He describes how a fourteen year old boy had been blown up by cluster bomb, he'd seen the yellow parachute flare attached to this, picked it up, dropped it and it exploded. He says after hours of surgery and after losing three limbs, the young boy died.

(15:20) He describes another casualty, who an American General Practitioner called Dan Clay, helping out in Kosovo, brought to their Emergency Department: a young Albanian man. He tells how he had a large bandage obscuring half his face and Dan warned him before took off the bandage that he had been shot three months earlier in a massacre at his village. Paramilitaries had shot at him and his newly wedded wife and they were fleeing for their lives when he felt a blow to his face and he fell to the ground, lost consciousness. When he recovered, he realised that literally he'd had his right eye, his nose and his maxilla blown away. He says that two young trainee nurses cleaned his wounds for three months as they continued to hide in the woods in fear of their lives.

(17:03) He says that when he took away the bandage obscuring half his face, there was a hole. Dan Clay had been going around all the K4 hospitals, German, Italian and American, who had all said that they couldn't do anything for him.

He did need specialist care but David also had his camera and email link and the full backing of his Commanding Officer, Commander Medical. He says that he ended up going to Manchester with the other patient and two other patients, two young girls.

(18:53) On 27<sup>th</sup> July 1999, David sent an email to the Director General Army Medical Services explaining what had been going on. He knew what had been happening as they'd been in regular contact but he was updating him. He told him that they had gone there woefully unprepared for dealing with the less acute victims of this war. They were ready for life saving surgery but not the specialist care often needed afterwards.

He tells of seeing two young girls, the same age as his two daughters. These two young girls

had survived a mass execution of children and women on March 28<sup>th</sup> in Podujeve when they were left for dead having been shot by Serb paramilitaries in a courtyard of a house

Each of these two girls had a shattered left upper arm with osteomyelitis, infection in either the humerus or the radius and one with radial nerve damage. Both required specialist surgery.

He describes trying to get these various patients medically evacuated to England in a very ad hoc manner and was in need of established contacts and clearer procedure. He wrote saying preparation and planning are necessary. If they fail to plan, they are planning to fail potentially demoralising troops, nurses and doctors, if they continue to be unable to help such innocent casualties of war.

(23:09) He describes a plane leaving from Prishtina carrying four people. These were one young lad from Prishtina hospital, who had been shot through his abdomen (Salford). The patient with the missing face, whose wife was expecting a baby, was going a Manchester Hospital, to the ENT and Ophthalmic Specialist there. And, he says, the two young girls, who they had been trying to get to Stanmore, would also be going to Manchester.

(24:24) He says that this is how he first got involved with Saranda and Jehona Bogujevci, whose story he finds so inspiring. He explains how he used telemedicine to obtain help for them.

He describes saying goodbye to the interpreters in Prishtina and one in particular, Besnik Elshani, a final year medical student whom he took under his wing and helped through scrubbing and his first surgeries.

He talks about them exchanging gifts as he left. David had given him print out copies of digital images and then Besnik presented him with a bound photocopy of Noel Malcolm's 'Kosovo' book which meant a tremendous amount to them both. The book had been sold out before he went to Kosovo so he did not have a copy. He says that he shall treasure this, always.

(32:04) He says that he has decided that he thinks the dedication in this book speaks for all who cherish peace, who have respect for all men, regardless of creed or race and to work to end the suffering of war.

Besnik wrote, 'To Mr David Vassallo, beyond words, beyond love, beyond anything, sincerely, from Besnik Elshani'

He says he still has that book, that photocopy has been right beside him during the interview.

He says that it's been wonderful to be a part of what Manchester Aid to Kosovo has been doing. He says he has been a surgeon at the front end of war, all too often, and just see the short, sharp, sometimes ugly, part of it and he says that what Manchester Aid to Kosovo has done with all the help or so many hundreds of people drawn out from Manchester, has transformed lives for people like Saranda and Jehona.

David talks about going back to Kosovo for the dedication of the Peace Park, ten years after he'd been in Kosovo in 2009. He says he was invited to go back to the Peace Park for the dedication and took his daughter.

The last time he'd been there, it had been war torn. He returned in peace as a visitor and speaks warmly of MaK and seeing all the people at the dedication of the Manchester Peace Park. He says there's hope after war and to see this, for real, gave him such positive views. He already had them about Kosovo, as he'd loved his time there meeting the people, that's what had made it so special.