

David Vassallo interview with Naomi Hamill (33:32)

22nd March 2015

DV: My name's David Vassallo, currently a Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corp in the British Army and by profession a Consultant General Surgeon. In 1999 I was the General Surgeon attached 22 Field Hospital that deployed to Kosovo when NATO had to move into Kosovo to deal with the genocide cleansing - as they called it - what was going on. We moved to... as a field hospital we set up near Pristina in a small, what looked to have been, a juvenile delinquent centre which had been abandoned, and we set up there. We had a ward in a basketball court. Our accommodation was in padded cells, with bars at the end and we just set up there in this compound.

(1:03) During my time there, I kept a diary and every so often during this tour, I'd refer to the diary to recount what was happening at the time. Remember, we are talking about 1999: June 1999, well before people are used to email and Internet: they weren't in fact use to it then. Hardly anyone had digital cameras. And why do I mention this? Well, in the 1990's, I'd been to Bosnia three times, as a surgeon with the forces, to Bosnia now, not Kosovo, to Bosnia. And my very first tour, it was October 1994; in our first three weeks there we had three wounded young children, blown up by artillery fire at a school near where I was working. One of them, in particular, had had a round which went right through her subclavian vessels, that's the vessels in the chest. And we needed specialist help: we needed specialist paediatric vascular help. We did not have that and that girl, God bless her, died on the operating table.

(2:10) Besides afterwards helping out afterwards with her local school, which we all did as a way of trying to show our empathy with the school, I wanted to set up a link with our specialists back in England. So the next time I was going back in '97, I'd been... we set up a simple telemedicine system, very

simple telemedicine. I'd found down the first digital cameras coming through England, which were coming in 1st November 1997. I set up an email account with America Online - as it turns out - and we'd gotten hold of a second hand satellite phone. So here we had the makings of a very simple communications system: a digital camera, email, laptop and a satphone, and specialists back at the Royal Hospital Haslar (which was the main military hospital down on the south coast for the UK).

(3:36) I tested that camera when it first came to England on 1st November 1997. It did the trick: we were able to take photos of x-rays of wounds and transmit them. So we tested it that next year by going to Bosnia and other places, and that worked. So come 1999 - now I'm coming into Kosovo - I took this same system with me, I took an Olympus C1400, in other words 1.4 megapixel camera. Think about that: it's only 1.4 megapixel camera. It cost something like £700, in those days. And we had this email access.

I'll read now just what it was like flying over to Kosovo. This is literally from an email that I sent out, ok...

(04:30) I left home near Royal Hospital Haslar at 02.30 hours yesterday, Tuesday 29 June, for RAF Brice Norton. The plane, an airbus, left at 09.30 for Skopje in former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. On arrival at Skopje, a flight attendant boarded the plane and tannoyed for yours truly, saying, there was a helicopter ready, rotors whirring, to take me up to Pristina (which is the next-door republic). I therefore missed passport control completely, was whisked down the steps of the helicopter by Land Rover. The outgoing surgeon was on that helicopter; he leaped off; he shook my hand; we couldn't hear each other over the rotor blades. He jumped into that Land Rover and took the plane back to England. Now he had been to Macedonia seeing some awful sights in the build up to all of this. I could so understand why he wanted to leave, so suddenly, but we only had this half hour gap for

a handover because we had to get back to Pristina. He caught his plane. I caught my helicopter and I landed in Pristina, in this hospital.

(5:43) And, I read here, I found the IT was half full with Albanians. The ward had 12 British military patients and 5 Albanians. Now, a few hours after my arrival, 2 civilian Serbs came in having been gunned down by a gunman and I was operating 'til 5.45 that morning, a baptism of fire.

So that was my introduction, my personal introduction to Kosovo.

I got four hours sleep then back to work.

As the days went on, as the days went on, we were being inundated with patients: Albanian Kosovars, Serb Kosovars and some British military: and we were looking after them impartially. We had an interpreter who went round with us, who at first was - she was Kosovar Albanian - and at first she couldn't tolerate having to interpret for Serbian patients.

But we said, "Look we wear the Red Cross armband, we fly the Red Cross flag above our hospital, we treat patients impartially. It doesn't matter whether they are military, civilian, enemy, friendly: it doesn't matter."

We are here. A wounded human being, this is from [the diary], a wounded human being, in war, is no longer an enemy but a human being in need of help.

(07.20) So that carried on for the next few weeks, with this telemedicine system: this digital camera I was taking photos of patients, as required, transmitting them by email back to England, to the relevant specialists where we needed specialist advice, for literally those first few hours. The local hospital, Pristina, was... had just been abandoned by all its Serbian staff,

there were even booby traps inside. There was a gun fire that same day and one of the British medics had to sort out some shooting going on in the hospital itself.

(08:03) We quickly began receiving Kosovar patients, as I've mentioned, children, elderly, women: the innocent victims of war. I was in regular contact with the satellite link to my specialist colleagues back in Royal Hospital Haslar, as well as to our Director General Army Medical Services, because this was the a) first time from Kosovo we had such a link and we'd only, as I said, establishing this sort of link the previous year in Bosnia. So it was very new both to the British and to the Americans. We had American colleagues who were very keen to find out how this was working in practice, both civilian and military.

(09:00) Here we are in a European country, devastated by war. Britain has moved in to help; the Americans are elsewhere; the Germans are elsewhere, in a different part of Kosovo; the Italians as well. We had this particular area around Pristina.

We received something of a hundred patients in that first week. Within two, three weeks we had some over 220 patients in, not all admitted, mind you, but quite a few had been admitted.

I mention our Orthopaedic Surgeon, he went over to Pristina Hospital¹, he took my camera with with him. And remember in our little hospital, there was myself as a General Surgeon and we had one Orthopaedic Surgeon. I couldn't leave the hospital - because of the possibility of critically injured

¹ The Orthopaedic Surgeon took the camera, went to the hospital, on the invitation of Dr. Tony Redmond from the Department for International Development, to see how he could help out. He came back with a report saying what help was required. David Vassallo used his email link to transmit those messages as required; they had the full co-operation of his Commanding Officer, of Commander Medical there and Director General Army Medical Services.

He writes, "You know, this was a unique situation for all of us."

casualties coming in - but because Pristina needed some assistance, he was able to go with my camera - go there to **Tony Redmond**² - and come back with a report which he then transmitted up the medical chain. He found that they had no Orthopaedic fixators; there were loads of people's with fractured legs which hadn't been adequately splinted.

We therefore sent a request for a charity which was able to send out these fixators and that was also funded by DFID. One day, he was called in to the hospital to see a patient in ITU, a young Kosovar Albanian male, who had been shot several days previously. Again, I couldn't leave the hospital so James took the camera, went up there to meet this person and the person was, had been treated inadequately surgically, he obviously needed further specialist surgery, which we couldn't do in our hospital, but with those same photos, that he'd taken of the wounds - and here's where our first contact with Manchester comes in. I had previously worked at Salford and the Hope Hospital for six months at a specialist colorectal unit with Nigel Scott, Gordon Carlson, Miles Irving. And this particular patient had through and through, high energy transfer wounds, sustained by Kalashnikov, through his abdomen. And there was faecal contents pouring out through holes in his abdomen, even after his preliminary surgery. He needed the help of the TPN unit, Total Parenteral Nutrition unit - set up at the Hope Hospital - and a specialist colorectal surgery. So I've taken these photos, I was able to send them to Nigel Scott and within a day, within a few hours, I'd received a reply from him which advised what to do in the meantime, while we were trying to organise the evacuation... because, that's complicated, organising an evacuation from country to another.

But Hope Hospital said they would accept this patient, if we could get him there. Therefore, we set up a date to do a preliminary operation - life saving operation - which was required in Pristina Hospital. James would cover for me

² Recording by Prof Tony Redmond available in this archive

at our hospital. I would go over to Pristina Hospital and work with a Lebanese surgeon who was there, who was helping out, with Médecins de Monde, and I'd have a military Land Rover stay outside the hospital ready to take me back to our hospital - fifteen minutes drive away - should an emergency come in, and with a firm understanding that I might be pulled away during the operation.

(12:50) So here am I, in Pristina theatres, with a military theatre nurse, operating on this ITU young male from ITU - with the Lebanese surgeon - and we were half way through the operation doing exactly what had been told us by email by Nigel Scott, at the Hope Hospital, when the expected happened. The Land Rover driver came running into the theatres saying, 'Sir, there's an emergency on the way in to our hospital, you've got to leave now.' So I turned round to Zahir Dubord, Lebanese surgeon, and said, 'It's over to you. Carry on. Good luck, I've got to go now.'

Sure enough, into the Land Rover, back to our hospital where I was faced by - God bless him - a fourteen year old Kosovar boy who had been blown up by cluster bomb: a fourteen year old boy blown up by cluster bomb. He's seen the yellow parachute flare attached to this; picked it up; dropped it; and it exploded. And we spent the next few hours trying to save his life, all of us: blood tran, anaesthetists, surgeons, theatre nurses; it took several hours. He ended up losing three - he had already lost two limbs. He ended up losing three limbs, ok. Um... It was too much for him. It was just too much for him. And he died in ITU nearly an hour or so afterwards. And that was awful day in Kosovo for me.

(14:35) I heard subsequently, though, that that patient, in ITU in Pristina, had survived that surgery, again thanks to the help from Manchester. He's survived, and as the days go on, we began to hear that the wheels were being set in motion to get him back to Manchester.

(15:20) In the meantime, we received another casualty. An American Surgeon called Dan Clay, actually - sorry, an American General Practitioner called Dan Clay³ - was helping out in Kosovo, brought in a young Albanian male into our Emergency Department. He had a large bandage obscuring half his face and Dan said - before he introduced me to this young lad - he said, 'Before you take off that bandage, I must warn you, this lad was shot three months ago in a massacre of his village.'

Paramilitaries have come in shooting and shooting and shooting. And he and his newly wedded wife were fleeing for their lives when he felt a blow to his face and he fell to the ground, lost consciousness, and when he recovered, he realised that, literally, he'd had his right eye, his nose and his maxilla blown away. He's been cared for in the woods for the next three months - until NATO moved in - by two trainee nurses, seventeen year olds, first year student nurses: all of them hiding for their lives in the woods. And they were cleaning him literally with clean babies' nappies that they rinsed in the streams. It's thanks to those junior nurses - those student nurses - that they kept him alive. When NATO moved in, he came out of the woods. People were shocked; they didn't know who he was until he brought out a photo from his back wallet pocket, from his wallet pocket - which was a photo of he and his wife that had been taken just after their wedding day - showed a lovely happy, blissful couple. His wife was alive; she'd escaped. And he said, showing this beautiful photo, 'This is who I am', a young handsome, happily married man.

(17:03) When he took away this bandage from obscuring half his face, there was this awful hole. He was missing one eye, his nose had been shot away and a big gap where your cheek bone is. There is no way I could walk away from someone like that. Nor could Dan Clay: he'd spent the previous month

³ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,40339-1,00.html>

going around, as he put it, 'face shopping'. He had been going around all the KFOR hospitals, Kosovo Force hospitals; the Germans; the Italians; the Americans. They'd all turned him away: they couldn't do anything for him. And to be honest, we couldn't do anything in our hospital, because that is specialist help that's required to reconstruct his face, his maxilla, his nose, his eye. That's really specialist care.

But I did have this camera; I did have this email link and I had the full backing of my Commanding Officer, Commander Medical. Within the Dan Clay bringing him to us - within the hour - we'd had him x-rayed; I'd taken photos of his face, full permission by the patient obviously, he knew we were trying to help him: young **Besim**⁴, his name. And I had taken photos of his face, front, side, x-rays, and transmitted them to specialists, in this case a Maxillo-facial surgeon who was in Leeds. But in the end - and they tried to move mountains to get him back to England - in the end (remember that first patient I mentioned was going to be transferred to Manchester) now this young lad, as well, went up to Manchester as well.

On the same flight and with them there was someone else. That someone else were two young girls.

(18:53) I'm going to now just read from my diary.

(This is a letter, an email⁵, that I'd sent that day to the Director General Army Medical Services explaining what had been going on. He knew what had been going as we'd been in regular contact but I was updating him. I'd been concerned about skill fade on return to the UK after such a trauma experience.

⁴ Besim Kadriu and Valbona Peci Kadriu recordings available in this archive

⁵ Dated 27th July 1999

(19:22) A serious comment to mull over: we came here woefully unprepared for dealing with the less acute victims of this war. In other words, for emergency surgery, we can provide that emergency life saving surgery straight away. But the patients who've now been shot, injured some days or weeks before, were coming to us - who need specialist care - we can't provide that. So who do we send them to? There was no regular chain of evacuation set up and this is what we were trying to do on an ad hoc basis from our hospital.

We didn't come, reading: We did not come prepare with the knowledge of how to activate a medical evacuation chain to specialist civilian care in the UK, for the children and other victims, who desperately need reconstructive surgery to their limbs or faces.

For instance, I saw two young girls this morning, the same age as my two daughters. These two young girls had survived a mass execution of some twenty five children and women on March 28th in Podujevo when they were left for dead after having been shot several times in a courtyard of a house by Serb paramilitaries. Each of these two girls has a shattered left upper arm with osteomyelitis, that's infection in either the humerus or the radius and one is radial nerve damage. Both require specialist surgery, such as can be provided by the Stanmore National Orthopaedic Hospital. So our current Orthopaedic Surgeon has said he will try ringing that hospital, he knows the people there, to see if they can offer treatment. I have similarly photographed their x-ray, their wounds, so as soon as we get the email addresses of Stanmore then we can follow up the referral with those images.

I did the same thing last week with a 20 year old man, whose maxilla, nose and eye were shot away and transmitted them to a maxfax surgeon in Leeds. Now we have to see how to arrange things from here.

The problem is: all this is ad hoc. Surely this is all foreseeable and could be planned for, by maybe your command in establishing contacts between military doctors and NGOs and potential receiving hospitals in the UK, before we deploy to a war zone. This is post conflict recovery, big time, and as we are here and faced by such victims, and we shall in future be deployed to other humanitarian relief zones, at least listen to this Cri de Coeur.

Preparation and planning are necessary. If we fail to plan, we are planning to fail! And unless we do this, it will demoralise our troops, our nurses and our doctors, if we continue to be unable to help such people.

On the other hand, positive development of such a service as I expound, would actively drawn volunteers into our ranks and help retain people, such as myself, let alone caring for the patients concerned."

(23:09) So where are we now? I've mentioned that, at long last, the plane was going to be leaving from Pristina carrying four people. One young lad from Pristina hospital, who had been shot in his abdomen, was going to Salford. The patient with the missing face - the patient with the missing face - his wife was expecting a baby. They'd only been married eight months before this happened, a few months before this happened. He had been accepted by Manchester Hospitals to the ENT and Ophthalmic and specialists there. And these two young girls - who we'd been trying to get to Stanmore - it had been decided upon high that it would make far more sense to send them all to one city, because of the network of support that could be organised.⁶ So they were all going up to Manchester. But at least they were leaving the place where they had been injured and they were going to the specialist care they needed.

⁶ see MaK timeline in this archive: In a global humanitarian response to the conflict, the British government evacuates dispossessed Kosovars to Manchester, Leeds and Scotland. 4,346 of the most vulnerable men, women and children are selected from refugee camps. 2,400 arrive in the North West.

(24:24) That, in a sense, is how I first got involved with **Saranda** and **Jehona Bogujevci**⁷, whose story you have heard elsewhere, and whose stories are so inspiring. This was my little part in facilitating their evacuation to Manchester where they needed the actual help that they needed and that they received there, which has been wonderful. I'm saying this in the year 2015, almost 16 years, in fact, since they were injured. They were injured on March 28th⁸ and this is March 15th, fifteen years later.

(25:11) It was on the 27th July 1999. I'm sure of the date because I wrote several emails that same day as a result of meeting them. An interpreter - she was about 28 or so - brought in two young girls and asked if I could have a look at them. She introduced them, they were two cousins, Saranda and Jehona - same age as my daughters - at that stage 11 years old and 9 years old, Saranda being the elder one.

Both of them were pale, timid, but you could see a sense of hope in their eyes. They told me their story: Valbona was their cousin; their older cousin had brought them over. Valbona explained how they'd been shot just three months before, March 28th, when paramilitaries went in shooting their families and they'd been taken to Pristina hospital where they'd languished, all this time, because they needed specialist care. They couldn't receive it, to reconstruct their arms and missing nerves, in Jehona's case.

Within the hour, again, of them being with me, with their permission, I'd photographed them, I'd photographed their wounds. They'd had an x-ray; I'd photographed their x-rays and transmitted those images back - with the Orthopaedic Surgeon's help - to people who we thought would be able to help us. And as soon as we got a relevant Consultant Surgeon's name, we emailed those same photos to him: that was Ralph Birch, who was a Senior Orthopaedic Surgeon at Stanmore National Orthopaedic Hospital, and he

⁷ Saranda and Selatin/Jehona Bogujevci recordings included in this archive

⁸ 1999

did a lot at that end to facilitate this, really pushing that we need to get them back to England. As I said, it turned out, in the end they went to Manchester but that's fine. It was a whole load of people, along the chain, pushing for this to happen.

(27:26) That was the first day I met them, they came back a couple of times since for updates on what was happening and so that we could just check on their progress and say, "Look, we haven't forgotten you, this is what's happening. It takes time for two countries to organise getting people from one to the other for specialist help." But, it was happening. It was happening. That's how I first met them. And it was so cheering to meet them on the second and third times because now they had smiles on their faces. They knew something was happening.

(27:57) I left Kosovo at the end of six weeks. I'm going to come back to Saranda and Jehona because I'm going to read a little bit of my last email from my last day, if that's alright.

"I started off on the 4th August, I leave here tomorrow. And, next week I go to Malta on holiday with my family, it will be a well-earned break.

I have been so very close to tears on several occasions today, it is hard to say goodbye. I would rather say au revoir to my patients and to my colleagues.

Two patients came back for review today to see me: one was an Albanian, a mine injured patient who'd lost his leg on 4th July, and a Serbian patient who'd been shot in the abdomen, he on not quite the first day I'd arrived but subsequently. Both of them were absolutely fine, fully recovered post op. They were close to tears, too. And, as today, I have had the unusual luxury of having another General Surgeon in the hospital, (he's arrived for the hand over a day before I leave), I spent the morning at Pristina hospital. This was

especially to see the patient I semi operated upon, on Saturday 17th July, that awful Saturday when his operation was interrupted by a cluster bomb explosion victim. I have not been out of our hospital since that day because of the need to be around for such emergencies (so this was my third time out in five weeks). He'd undergone all the surgery he required as mentioned by the Hope Hospital, he's recovering. I've been having daily Sit Reps on his from our Specialists who work in Pristina Hospital and to dress his abdomen daily. We are galvanising his air med to the Hope Hospital, Salford through the telemedicine photos I have sent them. I heard, as I was leaving the hospital, from Tony Redmond that he had just received that Salford would fund his treatment. So Tony was extremely hopeful that the patient would be flown out within a couple of days. What great news to end the morning on."

I'm going to read now, briefly, from further on in my email.

"I went round saying my goodbyes with an interpreter, Besnik Elshani, who is also a final year medical student who my Orthopaedic colleague and I have taken under our wing, to take him through scrubbing and assisting at his first operation. And, we involve him wherever possible and teaching him on the management of our cases. Besnik is now enthused with surgery, I am glad to say, and I shall keep in touch with him and encourage him. It was hardest of all saying goodbye to him and his fellow interpreters. I have given him printed out copies of digital images and then Besnik presented me with a bound of Noel Malcolm's "Kosovo", his book, which meant a tremendous amount to both him and me. The book had been sold before I came to Kosovo so I did not have a copy. I shall treasure this always for it means so much more to me having received it this way. I have it beside me right here, now. I think his dedication in this book speaks for all who cherish peace, who have respect for all men, regardless of creed or race and who work to end the suffering and war.

Besnik wrote,

"To Mr David Vassallo

Beyond words, beyond love, beyond anything

Sincerely, from Besnik Elshani."

(32:04) I've still got that book, that photocopy right beside me during this interview.

Ten years after I'd been to Kosovo, through the contacts with **Pam**⁹ and others, I was invited to go back to the Peace Park¹⁰ for the dedication. I went back with my daughter; it was marvellous, absolutely marvellous to be flying civil aircraft into Kosovo. The last time I'd been there it'd been war-torn and now I was going back peacefully as a visitor and then seeing all the people at the opening of the Peace Park. The fact that all these years there's been post conflict recovery and reconstruction and people putting their lives back together again. There's hope after war and to see this for real. It gave me such positive views. I already had them about Kosovo, I'd loved my time there meeting the people, for that's what made it special, but this was seeing it carrying on that way.

I've been a surgeon at the front end of war all too often and just see the short, sharp, sometimes ugly parts of it. And what Manchester Aid to Kosovo¹¹ have done with all the help, so many hundreds of people have drawn out from Manchester, to see that on-going, 16 years after this conflict - to see young lives transformed for people like Saranda and Jehona - it's such a blessing from God that this has happened. God bless you all.

⁹ Pam Dawes recording included in this archive

¹⁰ <http://makonline.org/home/peace-park/>

<https://www.edenproject.com/sites/default/files/documents/eden-project-peace-park-kosovo.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.makonline.org>