

KOSOVO

On the Ground



CWO-2 SETH ROSSMAN, USN

Leathernecks of the 26th MEU boarded a CH-53E in Albania. Later they would land in Greece, then move again into Albania and finally into Kosovo in just over two weeks.

The Quick, Deadly Trip to Kosovo

Gun battles in late June between members of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit and agitators came two weeks after Marines prepared to go ashore from the USS *Kearsarge* Amphibious Ready Group, afloat in the Adriatic Sea off the troubled Balkans.

In that time they demonstrated that the Marine Corps doctrine of training leatherneck units to be special operations capable in multiple missions, and that being prepared to rapidly deploy from the sea and immediately conduct land operations is not only valid, but also necessary in a world where crisis situations rapidly get out of hand.

The appearance of Marines off foreign shores still signals America's willingness to efficiently conduct serious and dangerous military operations. Although the MEU itself is small, with approximately 2,000 Marines, it is nearly self-sustainable. More importantly, it is feared and alarms potential foes because the MEU heralds the potential to use the full might

of America's military arsenal to back it in completing its appointed missions.

For two weeks, leathernecks of the MEU in the Balkans demonstrated most of these capabilities. The following overview was excerpted, in part, from the MEU's Web site, established for families and friends. What it does not mention and only implies is the tremendous preparation and work that went into the Marines' mission.

On June 8, the 26th MEU prepared to go ashore from the amphibious landing helicopter ship USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3), landing platform dock USS *Ponce* (LPD-15), and the landing ship dock USS *Gunston Hall* (LSD-44). They were to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's multinational peacekeeping force and act as an enabling force, thus becoming the first American forces to enter the Kosovo region.

On the morning of June 10, the MEU began landing operations from USS *Kearsarge*, and Marines came across Lithoro Beach in Greece. Their orders were to move north into Macedonia and

become part of the multinational peacekeeping force there, with British, French and Italian troops already in Skopje.

Meanwhile, the MEU's Internet Web site asked families to be patient "as the process may take several days.... So keep the cards and letters coming."

By June 12, Marines were near Skopje establishing a forward support base and providing security with forces from five other nations.

On June 13, the first yellow bags of mail arrived from home, but members of 3d Battalion Landing Team, Eighth Marine Regiment, the MEU's combat element, had to read their letters on the move as they crossed into Kosovo, greeted by cheering onlookers and showered with flowers.

They took up positions near the town of Gnjilane in southwest Kosovo on June 15 and set up a forward operating base. The weather was in the high 80s and low 60s. A day earlier, members of Company L, 3/8 found an hour to play football. Most, however, sipped bottled water and tried the latest variations of

Meals, Ready to Eat: Thai chicken, beef and mushrooms, meat loaf, turkey with potatoes, or pork chops.

Leathernecks of the MEU Service Support Group still in Skopje, who provide the bullets, bandages and beans essential for success, worked around the clock on June 17 to ensure supplies flowed continuously to Gnjilane. At the same time, Marines of the MEU's aviation combat element went to work building an expeditionary airfield, on what became known as Camp Able Sentry, from where the gunships and helicopters of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 365 would operate.

By June 19, the Marines were getting used to their new digs near Gnjilane and were visited by Secretary of Defense William Cohen, who praised the MEU for its part in the operation. In the days previous, members of the BLT had taken up posts in the local towns and villages and were conducting patrols as peace enforcers. They had also seized more than 100 weapons, grenades and munitions from the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Serbian Army. Many, however, again waited for the mail to catch up with them.

The mail was coming in at a pleasantly steady flow by June 21, and with it came the first hot meals since they left the ships. The leathernecks continued to



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Residents of a small Kosovo town waved to Marines of the 26th MEU and chanted "NATO" as the first convoy crossed the border from Macedonia on June 15.

patrol the surrounding areas. Colonel Kenneth J. Gueck Jr., 26th MEU commander, ordered all Marines and sailors within Kosovo to increase their alertness and ensure that everyone wore all their protective equipment.

It paid off. Dawn on June 23 greeted Marines with temperatures in the mid-50s, a stiff wind and a chill factor that made it seem colder. The cold was accompanied by frequent thunderstorms, causing the infantryman's old nemesis—mud. Nonetheless, most kept busy improving their defensive positions throughout the sector and providing security to

returning refugees. That evening things got hot, and the Marines shot it out with several people south of Gnjilane.

"Perhaps the message 'It is never wise to tangle with Marines....' quoted in the news from an unnamed Pentagon source, will spread around Kosovo quickly," was opined and posted by the 26th MEU on the Internet.

Apparently, would-be gunmen did not get the word. It got hot again on June 25 when Marines fought off a second attack by gunmen, killing one. The 26th MEU reminded friends and relatives on the Internet, "Remember, our mission is to act as peacekeepers and peace enforcers in an area that has been in desperate need of our presence. We are doing our mission well and safely."

It was also the day they enjoyed showers, fresh bread and Pepsi Cola.

On June 27, as leathernecks helped to put out a fire in a house, a Marine was slightly injured when a fragment of wall was kicked up from a sniper's bullet.

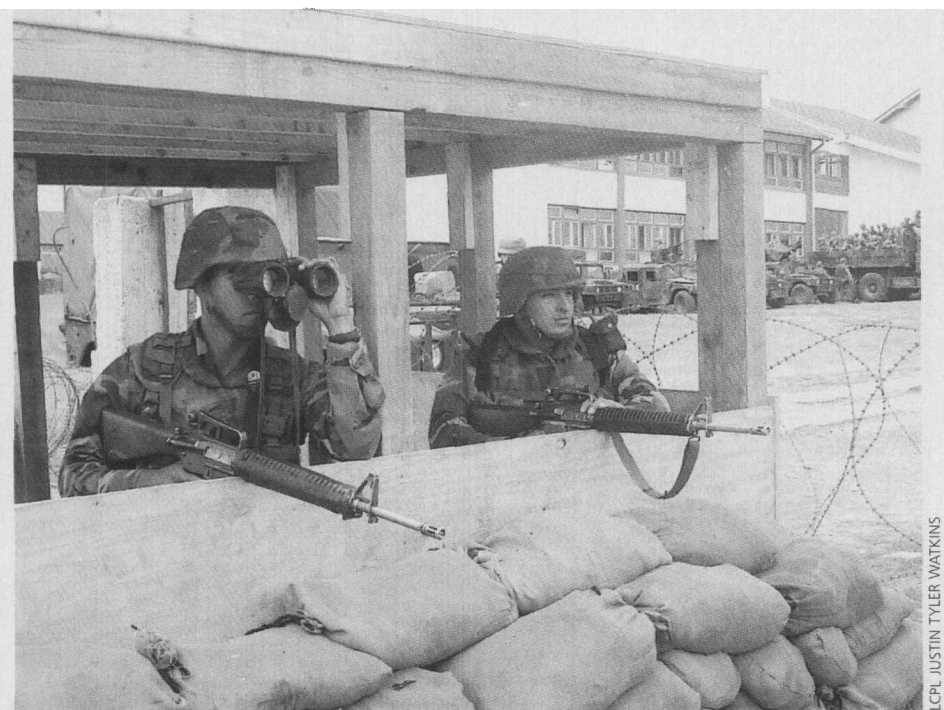
In a little more than two weeks, the 26th MEU had leapfrogged its way far beyond the littorals of the Balkans, and although it came in unopposed, it came in ready, meaning business and well ahead of the U.S. mail.

Compiled by R. R. Keene

Leatherneck Peacekeepers in Shootout With Kosovars

Marines in Kosovo came under gunfire June 23, 25 and 27. Two of the assailants who fired on the leathernecks died, and one Marine was slightly injured.

The first incident took place June 23



LCPL JUSTIN TYLER WATKINS

LCpl Joel Vega and Cpl Juan P. Ortega of L/3/8 watched the road from their check-point near the 26th MEU's forward operating base in Kosovo on June 18.



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A member of the Kosovo Liberation Army was searched by a leatherneck near Donja Budriga, Kosovo, on June 15. About 160 KLA were stopped by the Marine patrol.

while Marine riflemen were guarding a U.S. military checkpoint. The infantrymen killed one attacker and wounded two others during an afternoon gunfight at a southeastern Kosovo village.

U.S. Army Brigadier General John Craddock, commander of U.S. ground forces in Kosovo, told reporters that no Marines were injured.

The incident involved approximately 20 to 30 leathernecks of the 26th Marine

Expeditionary Unit, based out of Camp Lejeune, N.C. Initial reports were sketchy, but the Marines were believed to be members of 2d Battalion Landing Team, Eighth Marine Regiment, the MEU's ground combat element, and members of the artillery detachment from L/3/10, who were manning their checkpoints near the village of Zegra, south of Gnjilane, where the MEU is headquartered.

BrigGen Craddock told reporters that

the incident flared into a firefight at approximately 6 p.m. when assailants, dressed in civilian clothes, started shooting at the Marines with AK-47 rifles from a nearby building. It was not immediately known if the gunmen were Serbs or members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, which supports independence for the province.

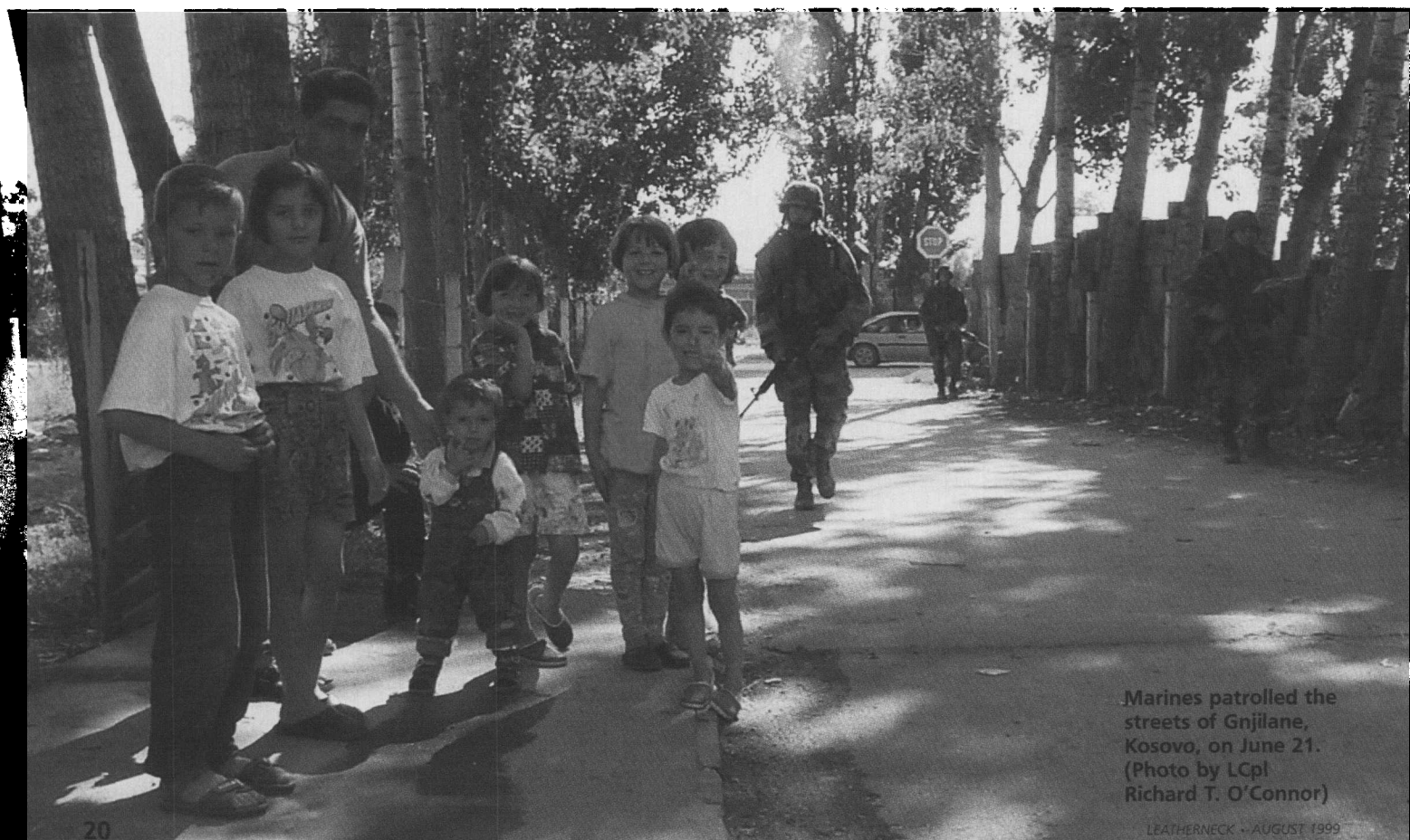
The Marines returned fire, according to Gen Craddock, and then surrounded the building. They were backed by light-armored vehicles, assault amphibian vehicles and helicopter gunships. With the help of an interpreter, the Marines eventually persuaded the assailants to surrender.

Marines came under attack for the second time on June 25, and again they returned fire, killing one person.

The U.S. European Command in Germany said the Marines "came under small-arms fire near the center of Gnjilane."

An ABC correspondent in Gnjilane reported that the Marines had come under fire from at least three buildings.

The U.S. statement went on to explain that the Marines called for reinforcements and returned fire while a leatherneck reactionary force stormed nearby buildings looking for snipers. "During



Marines patrolled the streets of Gnjilane, Kosovo, on June 21. (Photo by LCpl Richard T. O'Connor)

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LCPL JIMMIE W. PERKINS

the process, a Marine patrol found the wounded civilian man lying beside an AK-47 rifle." The man was pronounced dead at the town hospital.

At press time, reports came in over the wires and radio that elements of the 26th MEU came under fire for a third time on June 27. This time, a Marine was slightly injured after a sniper shot at leathernecks, who were helping firefighters put out a blaze at a home in Gnjlane.

Apparently, the Marine was struck in the cheek by fragments from a wall hit by the sniper's bullet.

"It took a Band-Aid to patch the guy up," said Major Ed Loomis, public affairs officer, U.S. European Command. "This was not a serious injury."

The leathernecks had been disarming Kosovars and Serbs since arriving in Kosovo June 17, as part of a peacekeeping contingent of 4,500 American troops supporting the international Kosovo peace force, or KFOR. The Marines alone had seized more than 100 weapons, grenades and munitions from the KLA and Serbian Army. However, military officials said that many militia and soldiers on both sides have avoided being disarmed by shedding their uniforms and burying their weapons.

The Marines are not the sole targets of Kosovar gunmen. On June 22, paratroopers of the Army's 82d Airborne Division were fired at. No one was killed, but three men were later detained.

The incidents occurred at a time when

Above: Marines risked sniper fire during the shootout on June 23.

Below: During the shooting, 1stLt Julian Gudger, using an interpreter, asked passers-by if they had seen any of the snipers.



LCPL JUSTIN TYLER WATKINS

General Erik K. Shineski, the former commander of U.S. troops in Bosnia and the new Army Chief of Staff, told reporters that peacekeepers would be in Kosovo for at least four years, if the experience in Bosnia is any reflection. He also said the primary risks to U.S. troops in Kosovo were mines, unexplod-

ed bombs, Kosovar Albanian rebels and Serbian military or paramilitary soldiers who may not be willing to lay down their arms.

Compiled from Marine and civilian news releases

