Doug Heckman

Quarry

Years ago, this rock quarry was a factory, producing rock and gravel to all towns around. I'm walking on a new road at Gibbs Army Airfield near Tirana, Albania and I wonder if the towns which surround us take pride that this quarry is producing gravel again.

The rust-black metal structures of the quarry loom like a foreclosed amusement park. This is Albania, and like the quarry, every aspect of the country's infrastructure has disintegrated. I detect decay in the buildings, old factories, and in the faces of people.

Gibbs Army Airfield is here to support the war efforts in Yugoslavia. They named the airfield for a helicopter pilot who died, along with his co-pilot, during a training mission. So far, they are the only casualties of the operation.

An old Chinese-built dump truck puffs past me, lifting dust and dirt and I'm forced to look away. Strategically positioned U.S. Army tanks hunker behind new earthberms.

We're roughly a month into the bombing campaign to regain control of Kosovo—we're beyond the strategic bombing of darting fighters and cruise missiles. B-52s have been added to the arsenal. We heard that two days ago, a series of cluster bombs caught two groups of Yugoslav soldiers in the open.

Serbian military casualties are to be expected. But there have been others killed. Weeks ago, we bombed a bridge near Sarajevo and killed people making their way home from market. Then there was the incident where our bombs struck a convoy of ethnic Albanians—the Albanians we are committed to protect. The papers read: "Unavoidable causalities of an air campaign."

My job is to monitor the quarry operation, to ensure this part of our mission, this production of rock and sand for the warfighter's base camp, is "up to snuff," is "making the grade," is an operation the general will be proud of calling his own.

Inside the gate of the quarry, children run beside a moving troop truck, jumping to the floorboards, begging for chocolate and MREs (Meal Ready to Eat). Across the way, two children chase a dog away from a pile of empty green MRE packages. The dog carries one of the torn, green, plastic containers, runs behind a pile of crushed pea gravel and under a strand of concertina wire. The dog clears the tight roll of barbs and the children stop at the fence and watch the dog run across the field. When the dog sees the children trapped behind the fence, it sits and begins working on the filthy package.

Then there is a child atop a large pile of sand. He triumphantly sprays his friends with a water bottle. He swings the bottle round and round—the water like a moving whip—as if the water were supplied by a garden hose.

The children screech. When the bottle empties, one of the boys races over to soldiers resting beside a large truck and begs for another water bottle. The child motions with his hands, pleading. The soldiers stop work and ask him how old he is, ask him his name. Another soldier gets a friend to take a picture of him and the kid. The Albanian child hams it up and forgets about the water bottle. His friends join him. Every one wants a photo taken with the smiling Albanian children.

The quarry used to sit outside Gibbs Army Airfield's perimeter, which proved inconvenient. So the Army real estate office bought the quarry, then bought the road leading to the quarry.

One older woman, whose home included a hand-painted door, rose bushes and a patio covered with grape vines wasn't impressed with money. Eventually, the combination of money and pressure convinced her otherwise. Her front yard now houses port-a-lets and green tents. Her flowers and vines are neglected.

The quarry first produced gravel for the primitive roads in camp, though it has now degenerated into a sandbag production. The soldiers and local Albanians have piled up thousands of bags for the camp. They have thousands to go. The higher-ups initially ordered 20,000 bags, then 40,000, military intelligence highlighting threats of in-direct fire, snipers, terrorist bombs. I think of African safari movies, where hunting parties collect piles and piles of wood to keep fires burning day and night.

There have been rumors of Serb Special Forces and expected mortar attacks from the hills. We've seen the pictures in *Stars and Stripes*, of what the Serbs have done to Kosovars.

The quarry is bordered by road, river, and pastureland; the quarry yard is roughly the size of a large supermarket parking lot. Bottles, plastic bags, used utensils, strands of wire, potato chip bags, and other trash lay everywhere. Stationed near the front gate, the port-a-lets stink. Paper towels, newspapers, used handi-wipes, and toilet paper are trapped in the barbed wire.

At the moment some twenty sandbag teams are at work. Unlike the neatly aligned tents or the ordered parking of military vehicles, the sandbag teams are spread around the yard: there are eight Army enlisted groups and twice as many Albanian teams.

Photograph Courtesy of the Author

The Albanians wear dress shoes (loafers for the men, heels for the women) or plastic sandals. Some of the younger workers don't wear shoes at all. Sweat pants and dress slacks are popular, as are dress shirts, T-shirts, and tank tops.

Albanians seem to prefer shirts featuring a sultry Marilyn Monroe or a Rocky Balboa in victorious pose. Many of them wear clothes

advertising Harley Davidson or Marlboro. I told a woman wearing a Yosemite National Park T-shirt that I lived in California, near the park. She looked at me with a blank stare; she said she bought the shirt because of the cotton. She made me feel a sleeve.

The GIs wear their camouflage pants, combat boots, and Army-green T-shirts. Their pants are faded on the thighs from struggling with fifty-pound sandbags. There are GI women in some of the crews. These women look much like the men, with short hair and arms built to handle the long shifts.

I walk between the piles and working people carrying a digital camera in one hand, a notebook in the other. I'm here to observe the sandbag operation process.

The GIs give me the worst looks. They love to hate me: a cleanly attired Air Force officer snapping photos. I grunt hellos, try to keep ridiculous questions to a minimum.

But I break down and ask one group how many bags they think they've filled. Finally someone says, "Four trucks full." Then another, "Too many." To make the point more clear, another GI adds, "Too fucking many," which I take as a cue to leave. A soldier asks if I'm a reporter for *Stars and Stripes*. Before I can tell him no, he tells me there are machines which do this work. Sand-bagging machines. He wants to know why the Army doesn't use them. He says that'd make a good story. He says I should write that one.

The GIs employ an assembly line. Four shovel, four hold the bags upright, two tie, two stack. When a squared pile of bags is complete, a truck is requested and the crew passes the bags, person to person, to the bed of the truck.

The Albanians mount a frenzied attack on the sand pile. They uses masses, all ten or twelve of them, as many as possible around the large mound, and work furiously, some with shovels, others kneeling and scooping with their bare hands. One of the teenagers has taped his hands like a boxer. These people without shovels, with or without taped hands, are closer to their work, are more efficient on their knees and hands scooping sand. The Albanians with shovels have as much sand at their feet as they do in a bag.

The filled bags lay haphazard around the Albanian crew. Then, in one seemingly coordinated movement, half of the crew goes to the shade while the other half ties the bags shut. When the truck comes, each person takes one or two bags and heaves them up onto the truck,

stacking the pile of bags in the fashion of a slash pile of scrap wood.

In one way, the two crews, the Albanians and the Americans, are the same: they both suffer from the hard work. Shirts and pants, of whatever sort, are sweat-stained, and when they rest, both crews squeeze into tiny slivers of shade. Half-demolished concrete walls offer relief while a few GIs lay close to parked trucks. But many just put shirts over their heads, pour water down their backs.

Albanians sleep in wheelbarrows, an American lays outstretched, his head on a brick-hard sandbag. And there is an Albanian asleep on a sand pile, curled like a homeless person on a park bench.

One of the GI teams passes around a water bottle. It's shared by each soldier and then the last soldier gives the little remaining water to one of the begging children. The child runs away, splashing at his friends.

A child approaches a GI team on break. The team is drinking water. The boy is small with a large head. The boy approaches the group and asks for water, even using the English word. The Americans yell at the child in Albanian. The child runs back to his group of friends. I go to the group and ask a soldier what they said to the child. The soldier says, "Don't know exactly. Something like, 'Get the hell away.' Whatever it means, it works."

The friends are angry with the small boy, upset he returned with nothing. The boy twists at his Spiderman shirt. I look at the boy with his friends and I understand that it's not the children who have changed: it's the adults.

The children's never-ending energy has ignited something awful in the worn adults. The Americans now yell at the children in foul Albanian slang. When that doesn't work, they throw empty water bottles. The children shield themselves, then steal away with the bottles. And when the children approach their Albanian fathers or brothers, the men lunge at the children, grab them by their hair or arms and scold them, slapping their faces with their hands. The children approach the adults less and less, choosing instead to sit by themselves or walk around in small gangs.

Three weeks ago, I visited a refugee camp. There were families just arriving at the camp and the children tagging along behind their families, or their newly adopted families, acted similarly.

I climb up onto an old concrete wall. Below me, people move slowly. The adults, the children, even the dogs. The workers have another four hours until quitting time.

The children stay clear of the workers. I watch one of the small gangs. A barefooted child sneaks up to a stash of MREs. He hides behind a truck's wheel, then jumps around and snags two packages. He runs and a GI runs after him. The child throws the MREs to his friends and the friends scatter. The soldier doesn't know whom to chase so he curses in English and stops. He goes back to the other soldiers and I can see his expressions and gestures complaining of the thieving local kids, of how you can't trust them, of how primitive these people are. The Albanian workers hear the American's excited language and understand the problem. They stand still and look blankly at the soldiers.

The children who stole the MREs are running through the quarry yard. They weave through the maze-like, trailer-high piles of sand.

They eventually group back on the backside of a large gravel mound. A few of them are ripping at the MREs. Brown cardboard and green plastic containers are thrown on the ground. The boy who stole the MREs runs up and starts wrestling with two other boys for parts of the MRE. The children fight and run and stop and fight more. It reminds me of a nature film. Hyenas. The segment where the lion is supposed to be the star, but then the pack of crazed hyenas flash into the frame, nipping at chunks and stealing the spotlight. I watch the children and I can hear the hyenas yipping and chewing at the spare zebra leg, blood on their snouts.

Photograph Courtesy of the Author

Doug Heckman spent four months in Albania during the Balkan conflict. His work has been published in *Weber Studies*, *Other Voices*, and *Reed Magazine*. A 1994 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, he recently received his M.A. in English from San Jose State University. Now separated from the Air Force, he currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he's working on his first novel.