Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 4
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 19

October 2000

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Recommended Citation
MacDonald, Jake (2000) "It's Been a Hard Day's Night," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 19.
Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol4/iss3/19

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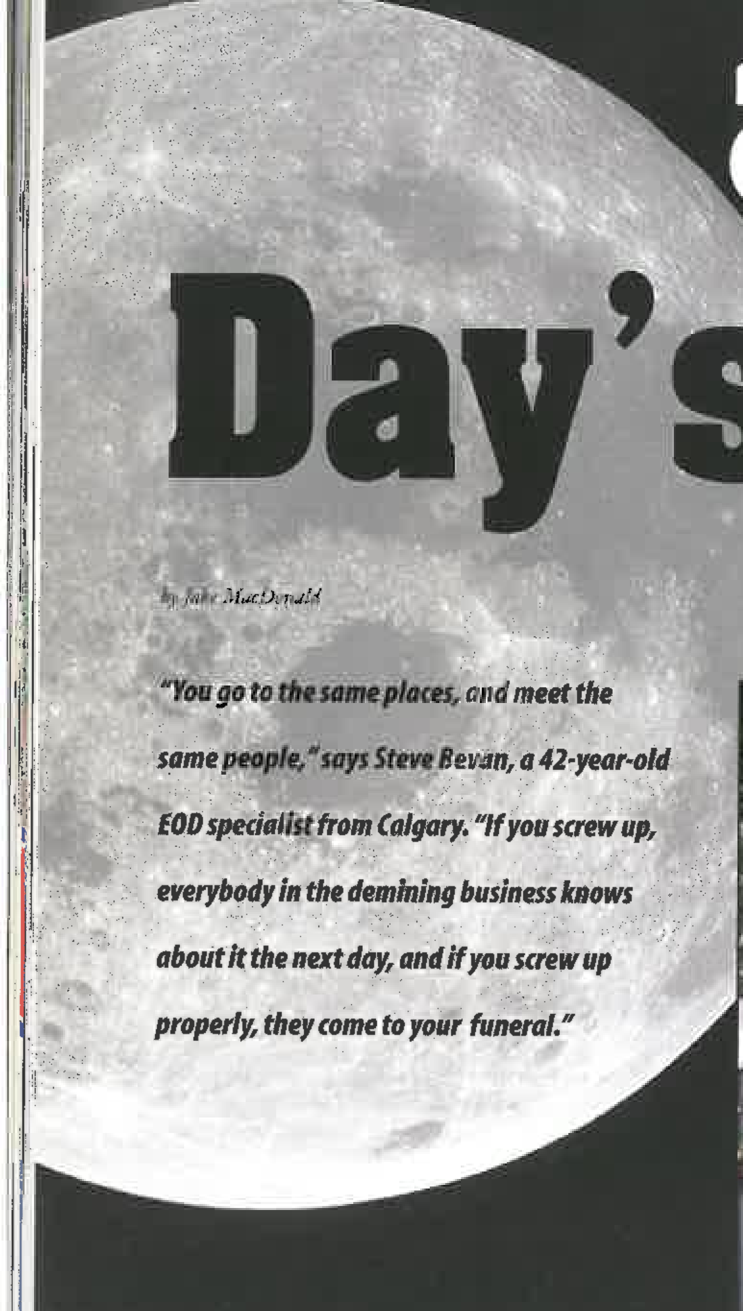

# It's Been a Hard Day's Night

by Jake MacDonald

> **"You go to the same places, and meet the same people," says Steve Bevan, a 42-year-old EOD specialist from Calgary. "If you screw up, everybody in the demining business knows about it the next day, and if you screw up properly, they come to your funeral."**

*An ethnic Albanian boy in a camouflage uniform walks next to Spc. Brent Baldwin, Mortar Platoon 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment Infantry, from Howeville, Mich., as he patrols through Gnjilane, 50 kilometers (30 miles) southeast of Pristina, Kosovo. The Senate stepped back from a showdown with the White House over the future of U.S. ground troops in Kosovo, removing language from a bill that would have set a date for withdrawal.*

Photo c/o AP/Boris Grdanoski

Before heading out for a day's work, the deminers and Explosive Ordance Disposal men gather every morning to drink coffee at a downtown Pristina bar called The Kukri. By 8 a.m. a festive crowd has gathered, and you could easily be in some college town cappuccino bar, except that half the people in the room are wearing U.N. shoulder patches or automatic pistols. On this particular autumn morning, the Texas Rangers are having coffee with the Fijians, the Bobbies are taking tea with some carabinieri, and the Zambians are talking shop with the OPP. It's sunny again, and everyone seems to be in fine spirits, despite the sulphurous coal smoke drifting across the patio where the men are drinking their coffee.

The deminers and EOD men are in a class by themselves. Each morning, when they walk through the door, the cops nudge each other and eye them with curiosity. An EOD ticket qualifies one to dispose of unexploded artillery, cluster bombs, anti-tank mines, booby traps, and, as one EOD veteran puts it, "All those nice things that rather quickly turn a human body into pink mist."

In Kosovo, the principal enemy is the AP landmine, a device that in the last 10 years or so has transformed demining work into the most dangerous job in the world.

## The Specialists

Dave Bruce and Steve Bevan, EOD specialists, are roommates. They're the same age, each have two kids, and have worked together so long they feed each other lines like a cabaret duo. They travel constantly throughout the Third World, and their operational requirements are simple—a vehicle, a few local helpers and some basic tools.

Most of the publicity about landmines has focused on the politics. Thousands of church leaders, activists and celebrities have flocked to support the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Former Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy has persuaded the leaders of 133 countries to sign the Ottawa Convention, which bans the manufacture and sale of landmines. But that doesn't help Bruce and Bevan in the field. There are about 100 million landmines buried around the world, and only a few people have the nerve and the training to dispose of them. At any one time, the whole contingent of Canadian specialists in Kosovo could sit around a single table at The Kukri, which is pretty much the case this morning.

Across from Bruce and Bevan sits a short, calm-looking guy in glasses named Roger Gumbrill. Gumbrill, 53, says he became interested in explosives when he was a young man in the army. "It's fun to tinker with electronics and blow things up," he says. "Then I got a little older and saw the destruction that war causes and decided to use my training to make a more positive contribution." Like Bruce and Bevan, Gumbrill has traveled all over the world. "You never know where you're going next. A few years ago I was in Mozambique. Then I was in Bosnia, working with mine-sniffing dogs, when they started bombing this place." He gives a sad grimace, nodding towards the busy street. "When I got here you could still smell the dead."

Gumbrill works for a company based in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Bruce and Bevan's company—Wolf's

*Deminers will be working in Kosovo for many years to come.*

Photo c/o AP

Flat Ordnance Disposal—is based in Alberta. There's not much competition among companies because there's enough work for everyone. When Slobodan Milosevic launched "Operation Horseshoe" in March 1999, the Yugoslav Army (VJ) swept into Kosovo, intending to "cleanse" the country of ethnic Albanians. One of their principal weapons was the landmine. Now the war is over and the Serbs are gone, but the mines remain. As part of the peace accord, the VJ was obliged to hand over detailed maps of its mine fields. But according to one U.N. officer, "There are far more mine fields than maps, and even the maps we have look like they were drawn by a 9-year-old." Volunteers and paramilitaries laid many more mines and their location is anyone's guess. Often, a mine reveals itself only when someone steps on it. The U.N. keeps statistics on landmine injuries. Some months are worse than others. In Kosovo, 156 people stepped on mines in July 1999. The number fell to 60 in September. But every morning, when the deminers are getting ready to go to work, it's a good bet that someone in Kosovo will step on a mine that day.

Across the street from The Kukri is the U.N. Mine Action Coordination Center, where agencies like CARE, the Red Cross, and HALO Trust gather to formulate ways of preventing those accidents from happening. They conduct outreach programs in the countryside. They hold mine awareness classes in local schools. When an accident happens, they provide victims with limb prostheses and rehabilitation classes. People are forever shaking hands and exchanging business cards. Deminers from 17 countries are working in Kosovo.

A rangy looking man in sunglasses and a cowboy vest walks past. He's Peter Wright, an Ottawa engineer who supervises a group of South African deminers. Someone asks him if it's true that shots were fired at his crew the other day.

"About 40 rounds," he confirms. "Assault rifle on full auto. But we don't know if they were aiming at us. They might have just been celebrating."

"Maybe it was a wedding," Bruce suggests.

Bevan frowns, saying, "Wouldn't that have been a shotgun?"

## On the Job

It's time to finish the coffee and get to work. Gumbrill is bound for the countryside west of Pristina, to get rid of a British duster bomb that some kids spotted in a forest. Bruce and Bevan are headed to a village called Lapusnik, where a young girl has stepped on a particularly vicious mine called a PMA-2. There are more than 300 types of AP mines on the market. Russia, China and Belgium are a few of the larger exporters, and their cheap plastic mines have become favored weapons of ragtag armies, outlaw nations, and guerrilla soldiers.

Most developed countries have devised bizarre inventions to replace human deminers. The British are promoting the Aardvark, a large machine with bulldozer tracks and a massive steel rotor attached to its front end. The rotor spins, and heavy chains pound the ground like a massive weed-whacker. Theoretically, any mines in the ground are knocked apart or harmlessly discharged. Sweden produces the Bofor's Demining Vehicle, an Ikea white, plate-steel monstrosity that chews the ground to a pulp. France makes a "magnetic signature duplicating device" that mounts on the prow of a tank or an armored bulldozer. It broadcasts a magnetic field that persuades the mine to activate 5m ahead of the vehicle. Germany makes the Comet, a 270 feet detonating cord shot across a mine field by a rocket. When it explodes, it destroys any mines in the vicinity. Singapore still makes the venerable Bangalore Torpedo, a tubular device that got a lot of screen time in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*.

"There's a gap between mine clearance technology and what's come to be known as 'demining,'" says Lt. Col. Normand Levert, a Canadian Forces officer attached to the Mine Action Coordination Center in Kosovo. "Machines often throw mines all over the place and some of the mines don't go off. Some of the mines are even more dangerous after they've been disturbed. Humanitarian demining standards require that we remove 99.6 percent of the mines, and machinery can't deliver that level of performance." Uneven ground, walls, trees, and underbrush also stymie machines. With such a varying threat, only one method is truly effective—manual demining. Armed with nothing more than a metal detector, a prodder, and common hand tools, a veteran specialist like Bevan or Bruce can demine an area more effectively than any high-tech gadget in the military arsenal.

Before they go to Lapusnik, they have to check some complaints here in Pristina. Their first stop is a school where the janitor thinks the schoolyard has been mined. Bruce goes up to the sixth floor of the dormitory and examines the yard with binoculars. Then Bevan prowls the ground, inch-by-inch. "In places like this a mine detector is no help," he says. "You've got all these gum wrappers, garbage. But this ground is very hard. If anyone had buried something in the last six months you'd see it."

After giving the schoolyard a clean bill of health they go to a graffiti-splattered apartment building where, through their interpreter, an old man tells them his problem. "The Serbs used his living-room window as a post," Bruce says, "and he thinks they put a booby trap in his wall heater." After examining the heater, Bevan goes down to the truck to get his tools. "There's no mine in that heater," he confides. "There's a thick layer of dust under it, so it hasn't been moved in years. And the screws holding it together are still covered with their original paint. But we'll take it apart anyway. It isn't enough to tell him it's safe. We have to show him."

It takes three hours to dismantle the heater and put it back together again. It's mid-afternoon by the time Bruce and Bevan leave, but they don't feel that their morning has been a waste of time. "Hearts and minds," says Bruce. "Now those people feel safe."

*British mine-sweepers check an area where three people were killed when a mine exploded August 2, 2000, near the village of Malialas, 30 kilometers (18 miles) southwest of Pristina. One person was also injured when the mine detonated in the village patrolled by Finnish peacekeepers in a sector controlled by British troops.*

Photo c/o AP/Nikolas Giakoumidis

It's a 45-minute drive to Lapusnik, down a bomb-packed highway with neglected grain fields and brick farmhouses on either side of the road. The houses look like broken skulls, with fallen-in roofs and eye sockets blackened by fire. Winter is coming, and the Kosovars are frantically trying to rebuild the thousands of homes burned by the Serbs. But they face the danger of hidden mines. "It's hard to booby-trap a burning house," says Bevan. "The buildings you have to watch are the ones that are intact." Lapusnik looks like rural Pennsylvania—a picturesque village surrounded by autumn-colored hills. At the farmhouse a dozen people are waiting in the yard. The injured girl, Ibadete Thaqi, a pretty 13-year-old, is among them. She's on crutches, and awkwardly hobbles to the rear of the crowd to avoid the strangers.

In March 1999, the Thaqi family, along with

*A deminer guides his mine-dectecting dog through a suspicious area.*

Photo c/o CARE

**"An explosive device is like the world's toughest boxing opponent. You can't lose control for a second or you're really going to get hurt."**

233,000 fellow refugees, fled south to a camp in Macedonia. After NATO airplanes bombed Yugoslavia for 78 days, Milosevic agreed to withdraw. When the Kosovars returned home in June, the narrow mountain roads of southern Kosovo were jammed with military vehicles. U.N. peacekeepers had arrived in Kosovo, and now massive armored personnel carriers patrolled every village. Every highway crossroads was guarded by barricades, piles of sandbags, machine-gun emplacements, and squads of uniformed young men from places like Italy, Hungary, Germany, France and Canada. When they got home, the Thaqis used the house for two days before Ibadete triggered the booby trap and was horribly injured.

Bevan and Bruce talk to the parents, and assess the house. At the rear, a brick staircase leads up into a makeshift bedroom. Squatting down, Bevan scrutinizes the staircase, the doorway and the darkened interior of the house. It's as cluttered as the rubble in Grendel's cave. He seems to be pondering the question, is the beast at home? "There's something in there that I don't like," he finally decides. "We'll get some more information and do it tomorrow."

At nightfall, the demining crews return from their field trips. Tonight, thankfully, everyone is coming home in one piece. Gumbrill wobbles back down the highway in his beat-up old Land Rover. Bevan and Bruce come walking through the labyrinth in the streets of Pristina, heading to The Kukri for a drink. The city has no streetlights, but the darkness is alive with faceless shadows. Raked-up garbage is burning on the road in front of the U.N. building, and passing headlights lance through the smoke. Although it's too dark to walk, let alone work, a construction crew is using a concrete saw powered by a high-watt generator, and the scream of the saw and the bellow of the generator combine with all the other cacophonous sounds of the night—Islamic music, roaring trucks, distant ambulance sirens, and a helicopter thudding through the darkness overhead.

On the street corner in front of the U.N. a stolen Mercedes Benz driven by two pre-teens has evidently collided with a patrol car driven by four multinational cops. Everyone is gesticulating and shouting. Emergency lights are flashing in the smoke. Although it's a typical incident for this place, a squad of U.S. Marines has arrived. Their whip-aerialled Hummer is parked on the sidewalk, and a couple of them are quartering through the crowd, keeping order. Atop the Hummer, a 250-lb. machine gunner sits watching the mob, his arm draped over a weapon that has an ammunition clip the size of a suitcase. At this point in the post-war transition, they and all the other KFOR troops are here to discourage the Kosovars from exacting revenge on the Serbians. At night there's a whiff of danger wherever a crowd starts to form.

Inside The Kukri everyone is laughing, drinking beer from the bottle and shouting. A traditional crooked Gurkha commando knife, for which the place is named, dangles from the wall above the bar. Outside on the patio, Bevan and Bruce are sitting next to Gumbrill and a thin, intense-looking man named Brian Nelson Smith, who has come here from Bosnia. He and Gumbrill work for the same Nova Scotia company—the Canadian International Demining Center. Roger is telling Brian about his next morning's priority call—a farmer who has decided to go right ahead and clear his pastures by himself. "He's pulled up 65 mines already," Roger says, with a shake of his head. "I guess he needs to get his cattle on the land and winter is coming."

Steve explains what he saw at the Lapusnik farmhouse that made him back off. "When we assess a threat, we look for something that's out of place. Right inside the doorway, there's a metal screw lying on the floor. Why is it lying there?" He shrugs. "It could be anything. It could be nothing. Either case, we're going to be careful going in there tomorrow." Bruce, Bevan, Gumbrill and Smith seem to feel that it's bad form to talk much about the hazards of their job. They get uncomfortable with words like "courage". Bruce is the stocky, plainspoken jock of the group, and he doesn't like to see the conversation going in that direction. "Listen, it's not some big philosophical issue. You've got innocent kids being blown up. Anyone with an ounce of decency would help." Is it stressful? Gumbrill frames it in positive terms. "The job gives you an incentive to work on yourself. I've studied Sylvan mind control, self-hypnosis. I try to meditate for 20 minutes every night. And I've found that boxing is a good discipline. If you lose your temper when you're boxing, you get punished. An explosive device is like the world's toughest boxing opponent. You can't lose control for a second or you're really going to get hurt."

Like the rest of them, Smith is an ex-soldier. He says, "You have to consider that even if these guys were totally stressed out, they wouldn't admit it. It's part of your training to suppress your emotions. I was working in Rwanda and I guided some U.N. soldiers into a massacre site. We kept getting lost in the jungle but we were determined to document this event. Finally, we got to this church with 450 women and kids inside, hacked to death. I'm not superstitious, but it was a very spooky place. And that's where I saw the most poignant thing I've ever seen. This old gentleman with a handmade coffin was sorting through the corpses, trying to find his wife's body. I'll never forget it. Months later I was home in Canada and suddenly I just lost it, burst into tears. And my wife, who is a psychiatric nurse, said, 'It's about time.'"

The next morning Gumbrill, a stubby veteran with courtly manners, thick, glossy, Elvis-like hair, and a dapper moustache, heads off to help the farmer who has the landmines in his pasture. There are deep cavities in the asphalt and dead animals litter the shoulder like torn sofa cushions. At one point there's a dead horse lying in the middle of the road, and the oncoming drivers careen around it without slowing down. We cruise up the rutted hillside for a few kilometers, past burned houses and wrecked farmyards, and finally enter a narrow, heavily wooded tractor trail, where Roger downshifts into first gear. We bump along, with oak branches slapping the window. It's a sunny autumn day, and through gaps in the forest we get sporadic glimpses of a calendar-pretty valley. "There was a lot of fighting around here," says Gumbrill. "And there are a lot of mines in the ground, so I should tell you the safety procedures. If we hit an anti-tank mine, it'll turn the vehicle over. If you're still alive, crawl out the tailgate and make your way back to the other vehicles. If we hit an AP mine, it'll blow the wheel off, but we probably won't be hurt. Walk back to the other vehicles, and make sure you keep on the tire tracks."

The landmines in Kosovo are two basic types: PMA-3 "blast mines", which look like fat plastic hockey pucks, and PMR-2 "fragmentation mines", which resemble grenades affixed to wooden stakes. Each type of mine is designed for a specific application. Fragmentation mines are intended to send shock waves into the lower leg, which in turn cause a rapidly collapsing column of jellied muscle and shattered bone millisecond by millisecond. Blast mines, unlike frags, are not designed to kill (in fact, they cauterize the blood vessels so the victim won't bleed out). They are designed to produce screaming victims, to terrify. If you accept that a landmine's purpose is to cripple or to kill, it's easier to follow the logic that has led to "refinements" in their design.

Today, using mine detectors, Gumbrill and his "B" team sweep the pasture, looking for buried blast mines. They run strips a meter wide, and unfurl a ribbon of plastic tape as they go. When they notice a reading from the detector, they get down on their knees and probe the earth with a knife or a prodder. Most of the time it's nothing, a piece of tin, or a bent nail. Mine detectors average 500 false alarms for every positive hit. But with each alarm, they have to use extreme caution. "It's always a mine," says Gumbrill. "It's always a mine." He trains his crew to drive their probes in at a shallow angle, so they won't touch the pressure plate on top of the mine. "The opposition tries to catch us," he says. "Sometimes they'll put the mine in sideways."

*An area once used for farmland is now infested with mines.*
Photo c/o AP

When they find one, Gumbrill clears the dirt away and plucks it out of the ground with a long piece of cord in case it's booby-trapped. Once the mine is out of the field, he gently disarms it. Five months ago, the Serbian army camped in this forest, and they strung out dozens of PMR-2 fragmentation mines along the edge of the woods. Gumbrill uses light metal feeler rods to search for the tripwires, which are coated with camouflaged plastic. He swings the rod up and down ahead of him, like a blind man. His crew does the same, keeping a safe distance and unfurling a meter-wide "safe lane" as they go. When they come to a tripwire, Gumbrill clears a safe lane to the mine, which is usually visible, mounted on a wooden stake. "You have to be careful working along the wire. They'll put a blast mine underneath it to catch you," he cautions. Gumbrill then uses ordinary paper clips ("the deminer's friend") to immobilize the striker pin on the mine.

Theory is one thing in demining, practice another. Landmines are cheaply made and can malfunction in unexpected ways. At the Thaqi farmhouse, the Serbs hid a PMA-2 blast mine under loose rocks at the bottom of the staircase. Months later, the refu-

*With houses booby-trapped, and mines littering the countryside, the days are long for deminers and EOD specialists.*
Photo c/o RONCO

> **"It's not some big philosphical issue. You've got innocent kids being blown up. Anyone with an ounce of decency would help."**
>
> **—Steven Bevan, deminer**

gees returned to Kosovo and the Thaqi family moved back into their house. At first, there was no immediate problem. "We all used the stairway many times," the tearful mother told the deminers through an interpreter. "People stepped right on that spot, and nothing." Then on the morning of June 16, Ibadete trotted down the stairs. When her foot touched the floor the landmine activated and blew off both of her legs. Her mother was guilt-ridden. How could she have walked on the mine herself without setting it off? How could the awful thing have chosen her baby? she asked herself.

While Gumbrill and his crew work on the farmer's pasture, Bruce and Bevan meet with the duty officer at the Canadian Forces Base in Glogovac. After arranging for a "dust-off", a standby emergency helicopter, they drive to the farmhouse. It's a short sleeves kind of morning, with sun on the windshield and a pastel-blue sky. But it's late fall, and winter is only a few weeks away. When it hits, these roads will become impassable. The high-country snow will begin to fall, cutting off the villages. Tens of thousands of villagers will be facing the worst winter of their lives. And the demining teams will be powerless to help them. "We can't work when the ground is frozen," Bruce says.

When Bruce and Bevan arrive at the Thaqi farm, a crowd gathers around the truck, directing anxious questions through the interpreter. Ibadete's mother is crying with gratitude. She gives the men a gift—two cold cans of Coke. Bevan is taken aback, muttering to his partner, "Can you imagine how hard it must have been to get these?" The medic then pulls out a stretcher and locks the legs. The medic is preparing for the explosion everyone hopes will not come. She makes the bed, adjusts the blankets and the pillow. Bruce herds the family well away from the house. Bruce and Bevan take turns doing the close-in work, and this morning it's Bevan's turn to face the dragon. His suit of armor cost $30,000, but it will provide only limited protection against a powerful mine. "A suit protects your vital organs but it won't save your arms and legs," he says. "So nobody can come in the house with me. It's absolutely out of the question."

Closing his face shield, Bevan moves up the outside steps, hesitates, scrutinizes the doorsill, then steps into the house. With a ballpoint pen Gumbrill writes the GPS coordinates of the mine field on the back of his hand. Within two days, the location will be logged into a countrywide database. With one of his helpers, he walks along the edge of the forest and unrolls a long band of red plastic warning tape. "We were originally supplied with custom-printed tape, but it had DANGER MINES written on both sides," he says. "Imagine coming across that tape and not knowing what side of the mine field you were on." Safer Sela, who is Gumbrill's team leader, comes walking up with a cigarette jammed in his mouth and a strange object in his hand. It's a metal cylinder with a parachute tail. Everybody gathers round, murmuring in admiration. The interpreter, gets out her camera, "It's a duster bomb!" she yells excitedly. "Where did you find that?" Gumbrill walks up to Sela. "How many times do I have to tell you?" He gingerly takes the bomb away from Sela, who is a foot taller than he is and doesn't seem affected, and carries it up the hill. He walks on the pads of his feet, like a man carrying an egg in a spoon. "Those guys are cowboys," he says. "They don't listen. I tell them something five times, I assume the sixth time I don't have to tell them."

The Rockeye duster bomb is designed for attacking ranks and armored vehicles. The Rockeye opens during its descent and sheds 147 bomblets, each one equipped with a magnesium warhead capable of destroying a tank. About 10 percent of the bomblets don't go off. In their unexploded state, they present almost as great a hazard to civilians as land mines. Even one bomblet contains enough high explosive to vaporize anyone standing nearby. At the top of the hill Gumbrill kneels down, slowly and gently laying the bomblet on the grass. "You can't disarm these things," he says, "and they're very unstable. Five kids saw one a few weeks ago. They threw stones at it, and it killed four of them." He carefully couches plastique up against it, then presses a blasting cap into the explosive. "We're taught to approach these things with extreme caution." Gumbrill unrolls a spool of electrical wire as we walk back down the hill. Three cows are grazing along the hillside, and he shoos them to safety. Down at the vehicles, he assigns people to block the road, then tells everybody to take cover. Five hundred meters up the hill, there's a flash of fire, and a geyser of dirt rockets upward. A half-second later the sound hits us—a sharp thunderclap. In the nearby pasture, the cows don't even look up.

## Day's End

At the end of his workday, Gumbrill says a surprising thing: "Our biggest enemy is boredom." He's quiet for a moment. "You're clearing brush, prodding the ground, getting hundreds of false alarms. It's hard to stay focused. You haven't found a landmine in days. Then suddenly you're on top of one."

We're back on the highway again, dodging dead livestock. In the opposite lane, an armored KFOR convoy is hurtling towards us: elephantine gun-wagons, bursts of fiery sun on the windshields, handsome boy-soldiers with flat expressions and insect sunglasses. The Land Rover's front end is shimmying like a paint shaker, and with all that plastic explosive in the back seat, this is not my idea of a relaxing drive home. Gumbrill, however, seems contemplative. "My girlfriend and I do a lot of ballroom dancing back in Canada," he says. "We've even won some awards."

We stop for a moment at the Canadian Forces Base in Glogovac, where the dutyofficer tells us that Bruce and Bevan cleared the farmhouse in Lapusnik without mishap. It took them six hours. Now they're on their way back to Pristina. As we regain the highway, I ask Gumbrill if he's looking forward to going home. "My real home is out here," he says, gesturing to the landscape on either side of the highway. He doesn't literally mean here, among these scruffy mountains, but here on the edge of the world—Bosnia, Mozambique, Cambodia—wherever he's needed.

"My girlfriend understands me," he says. He pauses for a moment, as if trying to explain something awkward. "Everyone has to have a life," he says. "This is mine." ■

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*The day's end for a deminer and his mine dog.*
Photo c/o RONCO