

Rough Transcript
Cpl (Ret'd) Simon Savage, Calgary Highlanders (14 July 2016)

Deployment(s): Croatia 1993

Interviewer/Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: *Quotations are not 100% verbatim*

Timecode	Content
0:20	He volunteered when he was married and had three small children. Tough decision. Didn't go on first rotation for family reasons. Second rotation was a bit better prepared. Left Calgary in January 1993. Kids were 8, 5 and 3. Got to Kapyong Barracks and started workup training. Due to cold weather, they were sent to Fort Ord, California, for a month. Hit the ground "running"—ran or walked everywhere, no transport available. Sometimes used a cattle car. An American driver said, "If Canada couldn't afford vehicles, he'd volunteer to drive us."
2:50	Leaving his kids was tough, but his marriage was on the rocks already. "I told my wife this will either make us or break us, and it broke us." He didn't realize how tough it was going to be on his kids, however. Coming back to a mess. Came home 16 October and was a single parent of three kids by 30 October. It weighed on his kids their whole life. Their mother wasn't there and he wasn't the best parent. "I used to line them up at night, tallest to shortest, and inspect their hands. So they had a tough go of it."
4:10	He was "old" at the time, 28. At Camp Pollum, he was a master corporal at the time. Jim DeCoste (PPCLI) was intrigued about his family, his children. [DeCoste was killed later in the tour in a traffic accident]
5:30	There were distractions like financial matters. Thought he'd worked them out. They'd drive Winnipeg to Calgary for a weekend to spend Saturday with his kids. Did that 7-8 times. He did this to get his wisdom teeth pulled too. But never doubted he'd made the right decision. Definitely a sacrifice, but he doesn't doubt himself today.
6:50	Didn't do a lot of vehicle training. Did a lot of section and platoon attacks, a lot of defensive training and live fire. The basic infantry stuff.
7:30	How adequate was training? You can probably never train enough. "They trained us as best they could. We came under artillery fire and that's a shock to your system. It's not what you're expecting." The first day of the Croatian offensive he was on a task, turned into the Regimental Quartermaster's lines and there were sea containers everywhere, with a Swiss Chalet style house nearby. As they were unloading their sea container, the first artillery rounds started dropping. Didn't know where shelter was, so they sat in their sea container while 15 rounds exploded, with debris falling on the outside. "This sea can's gonna protect us, right? I just laughed." Two other

	soldiers were hit and wounded and got sent home.
10:45	Expectations? They had a lot of prior info from 3 PPLCI (Roto 1). But they did not expect to go into Sector South. But they were well briefed for initial role in Sector West.
11:50	Hoping to make a difference. Help people out. "There are people alive today who wouldn't have been if Canadians hadn't been deployed there. It was heartbreaking to see small kids. It ripped my heart open. Just watching them having to deal with war-torn town, blown-up houses. Heart-wrenching."
13:00	Took a reporter on a patrol once. He talked with kids and reporter asked for his impressions and he described it as he just did. "I could put my kids in those positions, and feel it. Then he asked a young private. He said, 'I'm 19 years old and really don't care. Doesn't affect me.' Then he asked a sergeant who said 'I like kids, but I couldn't eat a whole one.'"
14:25	Beautiful country until you hit the front lines. At first, beautiful. Then, near Pakrac, it got really serious really quickly.
15:15	Routine? Patrolled Pakrac and small enclaves around it. Stationed in a blown-up hospital. Would do Whisky patrols mounted in Iltis or M113s in the local area. Manned checkpoint WC8. Saw their share of skirmishes and arguments, "heated quite a bit at that checkpoint." They were looking for combatants, long rifles. "It seemed like everyone in town was a policeman with a pistol." They confiscated SKS, MG42, mortars. Once, with Doug Chudleigh, they passed an old guy with a wheelbarrow containing four or five 105mm rounds. "We looked inside and your eyes just bulge out of your head."
17:50	"Croatian side was like a European country, not feeling war's impact, but it got depressing when you crossed to the Serb side. Pretty devastating." He was very neutral. "As a UN soldier you have to be neutral. Treating it like a business, not putting my heart into it." There were feelings, but he strived to remain neutral. He was totally appalled by the Croatian assault [Medak]. "By the end I was pretty anti-Croatia."
19:40	A Company wasn't involved in the Medak fighting. They were in the rear. But they knew what was happening. In D Company lines their first night in Sector South, so they were familiar with the ground and people who were involved in Medak fighting. He was on standby to be the lead carrier into the area of fighting. "That night I made peace with myself in my head." The next day, however, the mission was scrubbed. He felt euphoric knowing he was going to live, but also felt guilty because they hadn't gone in to stop the Croats from ethnically cleansing the area. He thinks they could have save more lives. He's heard varying numbers about the number of Serbs killed: 50, maybe 100. "You feel pretty guilty about that."
22:40	Effect on battalion? C and D Companies were heavily involved. He doesn't think they feel the same way because they were involved.

	There was a great hatred on for the Croatian forces. "I didn't much like Croatians after that. And the rhetoric and denials. And recently them being exonerated of ethnic cleansing is a bunch of bullshit. They were just as guilty as the Serbs and should be held accountable."
24:20	Peacekeeper's role? "It weighs on you, no doubt. They used to give us candy to hand out, but I didn't do it. Wanted to stay as neutral as possible." He doesn't know how much peacekeeping they actually did in Sector South—more observing, shelled, shot at. They reacted and carried on. C and D Company came out with a different perspective than A and B Company. "For us it was chomping at the bit, wanting to get into the fight, and not being able to was frustrating. Devastating when you know the outcome for the civilians. Not sure peacekeeping is the way. Go in with maximum force and just settle it. Not sure what peacekeeping settles. Some people survived because of us, but I don't know if anything got resolved."
27:20	C and D Companies got to fire back. Which gives them a different point of view.
27:50	Reg/Reserves? At first, a lot of resistance. After a while it dissolved. Had some confrontations, but hammered itself out pretty quick. His platoon was mostly reservists, Calgary Highlanders. "We dominated the platoon with sheer numbers." Platoon WO and section commander were both ex-Airborne. Another Airborne section commander was blown up by a booby trap and sent home. He was replaced by a Calgary Highlander, Rob Stratham (sp?). He didn't see any difference. "We sorted ourselves out real quick. A team. No issues. Don't think Regular Force had issues. But a lot was made of it at battalion when we first got there."
30:20	Change in peers? "There's people you don't like and you're never going to like. You always have those dynamics. But in stressful situation you can overcome those feelings pretty quick and start to gel."
31:20	A funny story. In Rodalice in Sector South, they have to drive to A Company Headquarters, aka "Bedrock". With Chuck Howie and Bruce Graham. He's in back. Someone opens up with an AK on full auto. "We're getting shot at. I go to grab my rifle, but the sling's wrapped around something. Then I see the guy changing mags and then see him open up on full auto again. Looking at the rifle, smoke from the rifle. I had my own rifle in the wrong shoulder, then Chuck sped up and I got mad because I didn't have time to shoot back before we turned the corner."
34:00	Next story. It's not so funny. Heading to Rodalice with Capt Scott _____. We get to Rodalice, I was his driver. We run into Jim DeCoste (and Lt Taylor) and talked to him, he'd been his boss for a while. Then they headed off in two different directions. By the time they got back to Rodalice the platoon warrant officer told him "Jim's dead." He disputed that. "No, I was just talking to him! Heart -wrenching as a

	soldier to know a name on the wall. That was two weeks before we went home.”
36:30	Heading home on an Air Canada flight, one of the flight attendants asked, “Is everyone going home?” Then he realized the full meaning of her question, and it hit him. He and Paul Reaper were heading to Calgary in their olive drab combats with UN berets. Someone asked him where they were coming from and it hit him that “no one knew who we were, where we’d been, that Jim was dead. That no one knew but our families.”
38:05	DeCoste went head-on with a Serbian army truck. The driver and Lt Taylor were injured but survived. He heard they were stripped of their clothing and weapons at the scene, but is not sure if this is true.
39:10	Communicate with family? There was a phone to Canada, but had to wait in line. Once or twice a month, he thinks he could call home. In Sector South they didn’t have access to a phone for a month or so.
40:15	“It’s tough because you’re going through stuff and want to talk to your spouse, hear your kids voices.”
40:40	Leave? Supposed to have a weekend every month. He got two weekends and a two-week vacation. Cancelled after Op BACKSTOP and the Croatian offensive. He went to Budapest and then Opaca for weekend leaves. He met his wife in England for his two-week leave, then they headed to Sector South. Had some letters or care packages. Not sure.
41:50	His first rotation into WC8, Serbs and Croats were 20-30 feet apart only. There was a bar right there. They called the owner “Stinky”. A young kid came up in camouflage one day while they were talking. Savage had threatened to shoot him if he pulled out his weapon. But in Serbo-Croat he confused the words for rifle and vagina, which created a lot of laughter. The young man eventually stepped on an anti tank mine and disappeared. Savage requested permission to attend the funeral, stepping out of his neutral role, but his request was denied.
44:25	Drinking story in Rodalice. Stone roads, very old town. On a three-man foot patrol an older Croat invites them in. It’s his turn to drink while the others remain sober. They start talking about the stone roads as they get drunk. “Alexander the Great walked on these roads. Genghis Khan walked there. The Nazis too. And now the Canadians are here.” Gave him a new perspective on the roads. Then they walked back to the schoolhouse they occupied. He pulled over to urinate. The other two start chuckling. He’s finding it hard to walk he’s so drunk. The soldier on the gate said, “Simon, pull your pants up. My pants are around my ankles and the two guys behind me didn’t say a word.”
46:50	Alcohol policy? They followed a policy that if they refused hospitality, it got violent quick. Confrontations on both sides. If you didn’t drink, they’d be offended. Had a designated drinker program. So the other two guys would have a chance if something happened. He’s not clear

	<p>on the Canadian beer policy. It became hazy quick. Alcohol was readily available, including slivovitz and rakije. If you were off-duty, you could be drinking. He's not sure what the exact policy was.</p>
48:45	<p>Did it meet his expectations? No. He doesn't agree with peacekeeping. He fears current government will put soldiers into "unneeded stress situations". If you can't shoot back because they aren't shooting directly at you, "I don't understand it. Not unless your in imminent danger. What's imminent danger? Wait for him to shoot me first? That's crazy." A Serbian colonel talked to him at a checkpoint and was upset Savage wasn't chummy. Serb got hammered at the nearby bar. The Serb takes his pistol out, smirking at Savage. Savage takes his out. "All I could think is there's not a round in my chamber. So if he starts shooting, I've to fall to my left and cock it..." Then the Serb put his away. "So I tell people I had a Mexican stand-off with a Serb colonel, but no one believes me." At the GG presentation, his fire team partner told a slightly different version, where he cocks his C9 machine gun and this is what prompts the Serb to back down. "Ten years later, that was an eye-opener for me." Marty Woods questioned the story, "well, your full of shit". And so it was funny when his ex-partner told the story 30 minutes later.</p>
53:00	<p>Commendation experience? Paul Nichols flew in from BC, they were drinking and decided to drive out in Savage's truck. They got pulled over by a female RCMP officer for speeding. Why the hurry? "Well, ma'am, we're going to meet the Governor General." She checked it out, then returned to their vehicle. "Have a nice trip." Nice setup in Winnipeg. He met Adrienne Clarkson and shook her hand. This is 2002. "I came home thinking nobody knew what happened. Nobody knew Jim was dead. And Jim was mentioned there."</p>
55:40	<p>Reception in 1993? He'd had a field promotion to master corporal after another soldier got blown up. On arrival, he was told to take his new rank down. Became a single father really quick. Can't remember a lot of it. It was a big blur. Who's going to watch them. Within a month he was back at his civilian job. Told they'd be debriefed by a CF psychologist. It was funny. It was two people at a time, with a captain. (He and Paul Nichols). "When you're sitting in church on a Sunday morning, does the smell of death overcome you? We looked at each other and said 'I think we're done here'. That was our psychological debrief."</p>
57:50	<p>About 30 Highlanders went over on this deployment. He was the old guy, with kids. It wasn't until 10 years ago that he could hang out with the guys again. They do Monday night football together. Together for Remembrance Day too. They meet up at Mike Starker's grave and have a beer there. Group fluctuates. See people you haven't seen for a while, like Kelly Perich. Regulars are Chris Tucker, Jamie Moreau, others. A lot of guys went on to different tours in Bosnia and Afghanistan. "We're</p>

	at the Brew House in Okotoks if you want to come.”
1:00:00	Don't know what Reg Force guys went through. "Some guys cut loose as soon as they got home. I often wonder how they're making out. Other guys are not doing well, I'm talking about Afghanistan. I think the CF is better now." They landed in Winnipeg in early October, then were back in Calgary on their own a week later.
1:01:20	Hard to say what might have been better. Decompression in Cyprus seems like a smart idea. Keep them together then let them go home slowly. But sending two soldiers into a meeting with a psychologist probably isn't a good idea. If you had a problem, you wouldn't say it. "I'm pretty lucky. I came out of there unscathed. My problems were when I came home and had to deal with being a single father real quick. Looking back on my kids' lives... broken family... maybe it wouldn't have been that way." They weren't resentful. Were actually proud. But they're probably different people than they might have been if he'd stayed home.
1:03:15	Formal recognition? They had a quick debrief and were told not to tell anyone what happened in the Medak Pocket. Later, in the Unicorn Pub, he was talking about it with Mike Owens or Norm Stretch, and another soldier in uniform questioned the truth of what they were discussing. In the unit, it either wasn't discussed or people were branded as killers.
1:05:00	Effects? "I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world. Frustrating at the time, but it made me who I am. I can pretty much weather anything. Had some tough times since then, but it helped me. Made me a better person. Don't know where I'd be without the CAF. You hold those values tight to you, and you expect people to adhere to those values in civilian life. And it's disappointing when they don't. I have my family and my military family. And I'm closer to my military family. They are without a doubt my brothers. They always will be. It was a great experience. You lose some of yourself. There's no one who goes overseas... and comes back the same person. I don't think anybody does. My first and only deployment changed me in good ways and bad ways."
	Additional visuals desired: --Scott Taylor's photo of Jim DeCoste --video of 2002 GG commendation presentation