

Rough Transcript
CWO Chris Tucker, Calgary Highlanders (16 June 2016)

Deployment(s): Croatia 1992, Croatia 1994, Bosnia (CRIC), Afghanistan 2008 (He doesn't discuss Bosnia tour and glosses over second Croatia tour)

Interviewer/Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: Quotations are not 100% verbatim

Timecode	Content
0:10	Why volunteer? A funny story. Bill Donovan was RSM and Gulf War had just come and gone. People felt really let down that Canada didn't deploy to Iraq in Gulf War. Donovan called soldiers into a classroom to identify people for summer taskings... "And there's this thing, Op HARMONY. Anyone want to go on this? No! Sounds silly. No one put their hand up. Then, who wants to go overseas on tour to Croatia— then everyone put their hands up." Capt Bourne, PPCLI, was the Regular Support Staff Officer. He said that the current CO, Kenward, was a big PT guy. "So whoever we send has got to be in shape. So LCol Moffat got us a fitness trainer, one of Ben Johnson's coaches..." After work they'd meet near Sandy Beach to run hills. "He beasted us for almost a month, so we showed up at Third Battalion and there were no issues around PT. We were fit, ready to go." He was 20 at the time in 1992.
4:20	Reaction? "I was fairly dismissive with my family. It impacted my mom and dad a lot harder. It wasn't till I went to Afghanistan in 08 that I got the full gist about how they felt about me going overseas. My mom was a wreck; even more so when I went to Afghanistan." When his wife went to Bosnia, he began to understand the impact of being the person left behind. "I went to the pub with my Dad. I can't involve Mom in this. I gave him the envelope with all my funeral arrangements. The look on his face, it was pretty tough. We had a beer and went back and it was all good. So I can just imagine what it was like for them when I went to Croatia in 1992, but I was too self-absorbed." When he joined the army he had three goals: "Go to Cyprus, get jump course, and progress in rank. Got two out of three."
7:30	As a kid he wanted to be a cop. But he went to an open house in Wingham, Ontario, where Highland Fusiliers were recruiting. One recruiter had just returned from Cyprus and was wearing his UN beret. "Why would I not want to do this. Cyprus was my focus."
8:40	Fellow soldiers? One reputation we have as a regiment is that it doesn't matter where you go, but you're always together. Gravitate to the table where all the guys are. Guys on tour with him like Estabrooks, Fritz, Lacentra etc There were about 30. Josh Pullen, who's now the piper for the band The Dropkick Murphys, went overseas too. "We formed the

	largest contribution to that tour by reserve unit.”
10:30	Expectations? Phenomenal question. Normal battalion life in the morning when we got there, sit around till lunch, more PT in the afternoon, administrative stuff, going on exercise. The biggest factor why he never joined the Regular Force: the attitude of some NCOs – “you troops are so screwed. It’s going to be just like Cyprus.” He wondered why they didn’t do more first aid. They watched the movie Combat Medicine in Vietnam several times, including the portion where doctors extract a 7.62mm bullet from a soldier’s eye. “Ooooh.” We could see what was happening over there, taking casualties, and he thought his basic training—not his workup training—prepared them for overseas. Not a shot against the battalion. “Just the mindset we were in at the time. Things started to change after the command team returned from its recce, but by then it was almost too late.” They did mechanized attacks, a symptom of the 90s. They didn’t have vehicles for the training. Few people were qualified track drivers or .50 calibre gunners. The thought of sliding a reservist in as a master corporal was the exception at the time.
15:20	He mentions several names of reservists, including one who’d been in Rhodesia and South Africa, who was marginalized at first, but eventually became the platoon second in command (Gilmore from the Royal Westminster Regiment). Others were also inspirational. His platoon commander was Lt Sean Hackett, PPCLI, another good leader. But workup training... the telling tale was their arrival in Zagreb when they were issued helmet, ammo, flak vest and put on a bus. “Just take it. Trust me. You need to take this.” Beautiful countryside, then... Sector West, Camp Pollum. Mud was very deep, everyone tip-toeing through it. “Oh, it’s going to be like Cyprus. A young corporal covered in mud said, ‘Boys, this isn’t Cyprus’ The first thing out of his mouth.” They headed off to the OP, WC9, with a massive hole in the house where they were staying. Rats and mice everywhere. Austere, but par for the course. Then at six o’clock: “OK, boys, get in the carrier. Right at six, five mortar rounds came in. What the hell’s going on? This is exactly what I thought this was going to be. There’s a war going on and we’re stuck in the middle of it.”
20:10	Four days later, the ambush happened. At WC9, a vehicle checkpoint, the Dragovic (?) was packed. The major route from Pakrac to Banja Luka. Hundreds of cars. Trying to pick up the lingo. One soldier was born in Czechoslovakia and could speak to people. Then they headed back to their house to eat. He set his food down, took a bite of chicken, then heard a weird noise. “What the hell was that? That sounded like an ambush. Kit up! Field phone rings. Rob’s on the phone. He says people have been shot down the road.” They head there in their carrier. There’s a car in a ditch, shot up. Four guys inside, all construction guys with drywall mud or concrete on them. They set up a

	<p>perimeter. "Take care of this guy. I grab this guy who's been shot at least nine times. Through elbow. Through side. Lungs. Shot through leg. Knee's destroyed. He is bleeding like I've never seen before in my life." He only has two field dressings. "What do I patch first? He's bleeding so bad." Another carrier shows up from WC10. They start throwing field dressings at him. "Here's another one!" Ambulance comes and medic tries to put an IV in him. "I go back and take my sentry position in the cordon. They gave us a little salvo, a little good-bye. Then left. We pushed car into ditch. It was just after six. Now it was 7:30. I sat down and I have got blood all over my face, all over my uniform. Completely covered in blood, down to my boots. At that point, I was a little angry. 'We should have been prepared'. This isn't Cyprus. It's a shooting war. We're showing up for a shooting war and we're not prepared for it. That was my first week, yeah."</p>
27:40	<p>He kept a journal. After that day, he threw it into his barrack box and hasn't looked at it. Doesn't know where it is any more.</p>
28:10	<p>Why didn't he write in it? "I was pretty angry. Felt let-down. We should have been more prepared. An unrealistic expectation of a 20 year old kid, a private, who thinks our capabilities are more than they were. We were in a very, very dangerous situation. " Looking at the mission, the escape plan, if things go wrong... Op BACKSTOP—woefully unprepared with no air, artillery or armour. Partnered with Nepalese. Their mechanized battalion was donkeys. Argentinians had beautiful Marders with 20mm chain guns. They just sat in the camp compound and never moved on patrol.</p>
30:40	<p>After the ambush, there was no vehicle traffic, just Croatian police driving fast. Chance of another ambush was high. They'd be hunkered down behind the dash, pistol out. They'd do a cursory search of the vehicle at the checkpoint. One day, a car approaches from the north. Usually only Canadian vehicles would come from this direction. This vehicle is filled with Argentinian soldiers. "Something's very wrong here. In a civilian car. " Checked their IDs. Then checked with higher headquarters. Where are they going? Pakrac. There's only one road, nowhere to go. Recce Platoon held them up later. He always made sure he had a pack of smokes, even though he didn't smoke, to spur conversation. The Argentinians didn't have any weapons. They were conscripts. He believes they were up to no good, responsible for rape and murder.</p>
35:00	<p>What's it like in the middle? "Very frustrating as a soldier. Felt defenceless. They've got to shoot at you first before you can do anything. But if we'd started shooting, it would not have turned out well for anyone. That's the corner you're painted into on these missions." Our escape plan is to go to Hungary, straight north. If everything goes to hell. "What kind of plan is that? I'm no strategist, just a C9 gunner, but it didn't seem right to me. But these are early</p>

	days. I don't think it was well planned out. Most of us got home OK."
37:20	What was Op BACKSTOP? The French in Sector South had taken a beating, lost about 26 soldiers in a Croatian artillery barrage. They were in a bad position, all paras, very light on the ground. They needed a mechanized presence. "It was bizarre. Get in here. We've got to go. Pack everything. We're leaving. We're going to Sector South. "
39:30	"The only thing you need is your rucksack, webbing, and helmet. Draped rucksacks on outside of the carrier. We're going to drive this to Sector South, really? We were bewildered a bit." They backed up to the quartermaster's sea container. They got a case of grenades, ten 84mm rounds..."they started to throw all this ammo into the back of the carrier. This has just gotten really real all of a sudden. The ammo is stacked high. We stood on the ammo, not the bench seats. The top of the family hatch came below my waist. That's how much ammo we had." They got orders and "bugged out." Told they wouldn't see their barrack boxes again. Left cooks behind.
43:00	At hotel in Pakrac they (B Company) marshaled with C Company. Faces showed the seriousness. Recce Platoon cleared the route. Delta Company went first. When A Company got into Okacani, they ran into the Croatians. Perhaps 2-3,000. A Company was stuck there and his company still hadn't left the hotel compound. There was an ultimatum from the Croatians, he understands, "as soon as you leave, we're rolling through this whole place." Ultimately, they were told they weren't going. They were sent back to their old positions. He thinks there were 10,000 Croatian soldiers waiting outside the UN Protection Area. Canadians set up defensive positions and fall-back positions for the other companies all the way back to Pakrac. His company started at WC10 and worked into Pakrac building more defensive positions. "Basically getting ready for the invasion of the UNPA. A long month digging defensive positions."
47:15	Homecoming? Came back in the spring of 1993. Before they left, they were asked if they wanted to stay back for another tour. Some guys did. "I was tired and wanted to go home. I'd done my bit." The other tough part was that all Calgary Highlanders were in C Company, only two in B Company. A tour is easier to handle when you're with your buddies. On leave, he'd go with other Highlanders. Didn't make his own plans. It showed "how tight we were as a unit, going overseas. You're a Cal High, you're OK in our books."
49:40	Regular/Reserve mix? "There's good guys and a bad guys. For every ten guys, there's one who's a douche. Saw the divide when we came back. Some wouldn't even talk to you. Unfortunately, there's a lot of those guys."
51:10	His platoon was the heaviest in terms of reservists. More in his section than Regular Force. Guys from SD&G Highlanders, N Sask R, Regina Rifles, from all across western Canada. "I didn't make the alphabetical

	cut-off to get into C Company.”
52:20	A great learning experience. The patrolling. The operations, like Op BACKSTOP—“never dug so many holes in my life”
53:00	Evolution of Canadian Army? People at the strategic level knew how unprepared we were. “We went from three month workup training in 1992 to nine months in 2008 when we went to Afghanistan. The creep was ridiculous. From one extreme to another. You can do all the workup training you need in three months. Our administration is so convoluted. Three months into the training, guys still weren’t getting paid properly. It was unreal.” Some learning, but massive pendulum swing. “Got to learn how to use fire extinguishers, redo every ounce of training we’d ever done... Ridiculous. And it has a huge impact on soldiers when they come back.”
55:25	“The only thing I wanted was to be back with the regiment, then a month later I wanted to be back in Croatia. Kicked myself for not staying.” He volunteered for Ex Rendezvous 93. The idea was to go back to Victoria with a bunch of others, spend two weeks and then go on RV. It was ridiculous, going from tour to a major exercise. Everyone else got put on a plane and went straight to Calgary. Tucker and Estabrooks went to Victoria instead and stayed there for two weeks. Maybe not Estabrooks
58:00	The CO was there in Calgary with a piper to meet everyone. Meanwhile, he’s in Victoria, waiting to get home himself. Then told he wasn’t going to RV. Only Regular Force, not reservists. Another week passes. At Victoria airport, he waited with other reservists. Penny packeted on various aircraft. He was last guy to be allocated to a flight. He sat there for hours. Finally flew into Vancouver and couldn’t connect to Calgary. Could only get to Edmonton via air, then had to catch inter-base bus to Calgary.
1:00:45	Got to Edmonton. Caught bus to Calgary. Got off at AF16, the only guy. No one’s there. “I’ve got no place to live. All my family’s in Ontario. What do I do now?” Best part, no luggage. He just had his uniform and IP bag. “OK. What do I do now? I called up a girl I knew and stayed at her place. Then stayed at Paul Nichol’s place, who’d just left for Croatia. Stayed with Terry for a bit, for about the whole time Paul was deployed. Went home for a bit. Then got a tasking in Wainwright. Spent the summer there.” Then he volunteered for Roto 4 in 1994. “Sign me up, coach.”
1:02:50	Repeat motivation? “Because guys from the regiment were going. And things were happening. It’s the way I felt I was contributing, doing something, making a difference. Guys from my regiment were going and I’m going with them. On top of that, I liked being overseas. It was fun. Not much of a motivation, but that’s what drove me.” He was indoctrinated into the regimental family, guys like Heinz Winkel, Davey Boyer, Bill Toews. Guys who went to war. “They were at a level here,

	we're were non-existent. But it brought me to a level closer."
1:05:25	"I don't recall having second thoughts. It shaped a lot of what I did, especially Afghanistan. It is what it is. If you don't like the direction the bus is going, you need to drive the bus and get it to where it needs to go. That's my motivation for progressing in rank. Here I am as the RSM now."
1:06:45	Even at lower ranks, there are still soldiers you can make a difference for. Second time he went he was a C9 gunner too. "I was so good at it." With 1 PPCLI in 1994, if you'd been on a past tour, you didn't have to do the selection training they'd set up. He went straight into the company. Had his tam o-shanter on. Walked into 9 Platoon, C Company, and "they're all looking at me, selection's out there. You're in the wrong place. I don't have to do selection. I've already been to Croatia. They're looking at me... like, whatever." He met a friend from his first tour. He joined a game of euker. "I dropped a hand and I was good." The difference between Third and First Battalion was night and day in terms of relations between Regs and Reserves. First Battalion was more friendly, and he had a better tour—"even though we did less than in 1992." He still talks with guys from that tour. "That's what the army should be like."
1:10:40	Afghanistan Reg/Reserve mix? They were a reserve entity doing force protection with the National Support Element: gateguard and convoy escort. "The frustrating part is that they're screaming for infants in the battlespace, and there's a 40-man infantry platoon watching the gate at KAF." He wishes they'd been sent to one of the outposts. "Doing nine months of workup training and watching a gate was insulting." He nearly quit after that. He submitted his memo to CWO Kelly, who said they'd talk on his return. He came back and got promoted on the tarmac at Edmonton. But it was conversation with Kelly that kept him in. "He has a way of twisting things. That's what good CWOs do. 'You have a duty. You have a responsibility'. And threw all that on my shoulders." He stepped away from the military for 2-3 weeks. Got off the plane and headed straight to his civilian job. "Do you need some time off? It turned into four weeks off. It was disappointing beyond anything."
1:14:30	Being outside the wire, what we trained to do. Was good. "To get snubbed with menial work was frustrating."
1:15:10	He knew back in 1992 he wasn't going to join the Regular Force. Thought about it in 1994. "Nothing against the Regular Force. I've never disparaged a soldier for leaving Calgary Highlanders for Regs. But for me, the experience with the Third Battalion wasn't good. It wasn't a good environment. It was poison. It is not the way a unit should run. Had no time for it. It really poisoned how I felt about joining the Regular Force."
1:16:50	What's so great about the Reserve? He could continue to soldier and

	contribute in the Reserve, get overseas again. It just takes a little longer. His personal feeling is that we should stand up Reserve units for overseas. It's frustrating, to know that no one wants you. Battle groups don't want sergeants and master corporals. They might take them. In Afghanistan workup training they promoted master corporals to sergeant and even warrant in order to deploy. He topped his 3B course, but in the end found himself watching a gate. Some reservists never even left the compound. "This is our corps, and they leave us behind? We're not good enough? I disagree."
1:19:20	Homecoming in the 90s for reservists compared to Afghanistan? No comparison at all. Back in the 90s, we'd been out of the game for so long, we were relearning things all over again—like reporting casualties. At Medak, guys like Sheldon Wagg and Kelly Perich were there. And no one knows about it. It's changed so much. The fact that the CO and RSM were there to greet every chalk that came home. That's the way it should be. "But it should be the regiment coming back, with the CO and RSM leading the parade down Eighth Avenue to the armoury." Picking and pulling bits and pieces from across the country does nothing to foster the fighting spirit or the regiments. Or the community engagement we're supposed to have in our communities.
1:22:00	90s homecomings? Out of the game for so long, no one was prepared. Got into a gunfight overseas in a shooting war and weren't prepared to be there. Dealing with after-effects, the army wasn't prepared. No estimate done. No one planned for the withdrawal. We just did it. Being a private in Croatia in 92, you're insulated from strategic level. Can't imagine what CO, DCO and RSM were going through, trying to plan operations with the tight arcs they were given. You don't get that appreciation until you move up.
1:24:25	His troops hated him for it at the time, but he got some vindication at the end. You can waste time at KAF, but he had them driving around airfield, changing tires and practicing other tasks. Vehicle maintenance too. Train as you fight? The large amount of kit we had over there, we were not familiar with it. Ripped apart their first RG 31. Found 50 road flares. Complete belts of C9 and C6. Loose rounds. Smoke grenades. "It was a disaster. We gutted them. Cleaned them up." When you swung the remote weapon system, it barely cleared the large boxes on the roof, diminishing the field of vision. Found some British boxes for artillery or mortar rounds. Got 16 and installed them, two per vehicle. Bolted boxes down. Made a bunch of modifications that made sense. Others got curious and wanted the same. His guys helped others bolt down their boxes.
1:28:15	Changing ammo. 800 rounds in the RWS. They figured out how to do a reload. Practised on the airfield, practiced at Tarnak Farm. He used his experience in Croatia and Bosnia and concentrated. Strangely enough,

	all this training came in handy as they had to change tires, tow vehicles etc for real.
1:29:30	Road repairs caused a problem for a LAV/Bison driver. He dropped the right side of the vehicle into a deep hole, at least 30 feet. The hole could have swallowed the whole vehicle. They saw the “ass end” sticking up. Used a tow cable to stop it from sliding deeper into the hole. Hooked up to clevis on the Bison. Tandem pulled the Bison out of the hole in conjunction with RG and another vehicle. Ripped bumper off the RG. It was someone else’s vehicle.
1:33:00	He would not have stayed in if he hadn’t gone overseas. He looks at the Cold War soldiers and has no idea why they stayed in. There’s a reason why young guys join the army. “They want to kill things. They want to do what’s right. And so they volunteer for the army.” They guys who make it a career, he tips his hat to them but doesn’t understand them. He’d like to deploy again, like Kelly went to Sierra Leone. Just need to do one more tour.
1:35:00	Haven’t talked at all about Bosnia, but it’s pretty important due to the CRIC—Composite Reserve Infantry Company. A lot of what happened, shaped how he feels. Not PTSD-related. But things he’d like people to hear. It doesn’t reflect the official record that was dished out.
1:36:10	One more thing. This regiment. We received 2015 commendation for sending more reservists to Afganistan than any other unit. He was proud of that. Proud to be RSM then. “But the one thing that has never been acknowledged is the number of soldiers we sent to Croatia and Bosnia. That irritates me.” He talks to people who are out now and who served there. “They just shrug their shoulders. It’s par for the course. But there’s no acknowledgment of what we did as a Reserve force. As a unit. What we did for Croatia and Bosnia. Felt by the vets whose names are on that board downstairs. It’s a travesty the army can’t acknowledge that. But things are rolling back, We did such a good job in Afghanistan, did the job, took casualties. But now again it’s starting to become that us and them mentality. The infantry corps is so fractured. Not just Reg/Reserve. It’s us and them. It’s like crabs in a bucket. Put one in, and it gets out. Put a bunch in, and they pull each other down. It’s about the Canadian music industry but it describes our corps too. It’s the true issue in the army.” Solve it, and people will flock to the army and it will be the army the Canadian public should have.
1:40:25	Example? The contribution this regiment’s made to Bosnia. To Balkans. The Canadian Army survived because of the Reserve. Look at Medak. Look at that battle group in 1993, the Roto 2 tour. It wasn’t a Reg Force infantry battle group. It was a bunch of reservists that might have had a Reg Force section commander or other commander. Way more reservists on that tour than Regular Force. The Regs could not have done that without the Reserve.”
1:42:20	Any acknowledgment now is too late. What he’d like to see: This army

	<p>take a serious interest in the Reserve. It's a joke, what we can't work with. We don't even have enough modular tentage, let alone manning. Can barely train the soldiers we recruit. Supposed to train as we fight but lack body armour, MNVGs, PAC-4s etc. Supposed to be 'mobile infantry' because we don't have what's needed to be light infantry. So we sit on the back of MSVSSs. That's how we're mobile. The corps has lost pioneers, mortars, TOW. Almost lost recce. Combat support is almost gone. Just starting to bring it back. Running the first TOW course in a long time. We're cutting each others' throats for a finite amount of equipment. Instead of telling emperor he has no clothes, we're kowtowing." We need to have the guts to tell the boss something is seriously wrong. "This is why we can't hold onto guys from Afghanistan. They go to battalion or get out. We don't have anything here. We can't train to deploy. Only training to train. Training for domestic operations? Yeah, I can fill a sandbag or run a call centre. We need warfighting skills."</p>
	<p>Additional visuals desired: --interview him again about Bosnia and the CRIC to get those details</p>