The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Dayton Peace Accords Series

STEVE SMITH

Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
Interview Date: 22 October 2025

INTERVIEW

Q: Hey. All right, today is October 22, 2025, this is part one with Steve Smith. All right, Steve, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

SMITH: I'm actually a native Californian. I was born in San Jose and raised in Santa Cruz County. My bachelor's degree is in political science from Sacramento State, and I began a career in law enforcement after serving in the Coast Guard in 1988. At some point in my law enforcement career, I was reading a police journal about a police officer serving with the then brand new United Nations policing mission to Bosnia, and at the end of the article there was contact information if you were interested. So these are in the days before the internet. So everything was snail mail resumes and letters. But eventually, I found myself in May of 1997 being sent to Zagreb, Croatia, to undergo pre-training and eventual deployment into Bosnia.

Q: And can you talk a little bit about that pre training? So you're coming from law enforcement in the States, and now you're heading into an international mission. What were some of the differences, what were some of the surprises that you encountered during that free training? And was it shocking and surprising? What was sort of a feeling when you saw that?

SMITH: Well, police officers are, by nature, problem solvers. So, that's something I think we share in common with our brethren around the world. The difference between the policing mission in Bosnia and policing in the United States was that we didn't actually have law enforcement authority. We were there to observe, report, have meetings, cajole, convince, and try to work with the local police to get them to comply with Annex 11 of the GFAP. To live up to their obligations, really, as police officers in an area that had become very ethnically stratified as a result of the war.

Q: So, were you interested in service? How did you decide to go and join the Coast Guard, but then also, later on, law enforcement? What sparked your interest in those professions?

SMITH: I had been a sea cadet in high school, which is kind of like boy scouts for the Navy. I think my parents thought that would just be a good thing to occupy my time with, and I developed a love for it. I actually went to Great Lakes Maritime Academy, but this is in the early 80s, and steel cargoes on the Great Lakes then were drying up, so I put the law enforcement side of my Coast Guard hat back on, and decided that a government career would be more financially stable given what was happening in Michigan and back in the 80s. That's what brought me back home to California, and that's what kind of exposed me to law enforcement. Also, in the Coast Guard unit I was in, there were reservists, and most of them were public safety people: firefighters, paramedics, police officers, and their stories sounded pretty exciting and interesting. So that's why I did it.

Q: What was your day to day as a police officer over in California? What were your kind of areas of work?

SMITH: So I started out in municipal policing, just general patrol. Then I moved into investigations and juvenile work. That caught the attention of the local district attorney's office, and I was invited to and applied to become a district attorney's investigator about six years into my career, and about two years into that is when I read the journal article about the UN IPTF that sparked my sense of adventure. The idea of working overseas, especially at the end of such a terrible war, seemed like a great challenge, and something that would be interesting and worthwhile.

Q: What was sort of your earliest memory about the Balkans and what was going on in the Balkans?Were you following that? Were you kind of engaged with learning about the area? What was your first interaction with that area of the world?

SMITH: I think, like a lot of people, we were following it in the news, and it was a bad, tragic, really unnecessarily prolonged human catastrophe. Something that people of my generation couldn't imagine happening in Europe given the huge investment that the United States and the Europeans had made in creating a peaceful Europe, in wake of World War Two. So it just seemed strange and awful, and when I was presented with the opportunity to be part of the solution, it seemed, like I said, a worthwhile and challenging thing to do.

Q: So let's move to the Balkans, you're arriving in Zagreb. Can you describe just the mood over in that area, in Zagreb, and how people were seeing you guys? What were your observations?

SMITH: Croatia had defeated the Serbs in Eastern Slavonia and pushed them out of the Krajina region prior to my arrival. So they were feeling the first taste of political independence. Franjo Tudjman, the President, was immensely popular. Still, it was a city and an economy sort of shaking off the old Yugoslav system. The state stores were still open, which seemed strangely out of place given their proximity to cities like Budapest and Vienna that had, at least from a consumer standpoint, advanced far beyond where they were. The UN wasn't terribly popular anywhere in the Balkans, mostly because, I think the failure of UNPROFOR, the United Nations protection force to achieve any

meaningful ceasefire or protection of the civilians that could hold.So we kept a fairly low profile when we were there. We were there for about two weeks. It was briefings on the political situation. And really a lot of it was just nuts on bolts on the UN reporting mechanisms. How to use their, what seems antiquated now, Lotus Notes format. Emails didn't even exist back then. We were using teletypes and fax machines and things like that to transmit. So we had to learn how to use all that.

Q: Walk me throughout those first two weeks. What was your training like? If you remember, how did you guys start primarily with briefing on a situation or was it more of, just as described, hands on?

SMITH: It was a combination of both. I wish it had been in a better sequence, but they were dependent on the availability of instructors, and it was a relatively new mission. There was a training outline, but it didn't always occur in the sequence that they had intended. One day we could be working on computers, inputting report formats, and the next day we could be completing our uniform kit. Another day again, we could be getting a security briefing on the history of the region.

Q: What were your classmates, the people that were also going through the training, what were their nationalities? Were they coming from?

SMITH: We were trained as an American group. We didn't find ourselves mixed with other members of the IPTF UN mission until we actually got deployed.

Q: That was the first time dealing with the UN system, as you describe it, all those challenges. But I'm curious. Just being an American, suddenly being put into the UN mindset; how they're thinking, how they're observing the world. Was it difficult, the first introduction to that system?

SMITH: No, it wasn't difficult. Again, I think we, by our nature, are good at interpreting regulations, laws, rules, things like that, and functioning within that kind of a system. So really, I don't think any of us were dumbstruck at all. I think we all sort of adapted relatively quickly. It was an exciting time, and we're all excited to get through the training and they get out to our various deployment sites.

Q: Now let's talk about your deployment sites and going in officially to the country. Was your next stop?

SMITH: Okay, so when we left Zagreb, they put us on buses, and depending on which region we would be pre-assigned to. So I was assigned to Mostar region, which is southeastern Herzegovina. The UN regional headquarters for that area, of course, was in Mostar. And then when we got to Mostar, we were offered, literally on the bus, a list of stations we could be sent to, and we had to make our decisions right then.

Q: What was the mood on the bus? Was there excitement, fear, uncertainty?

SMITH: I think all of those things are fair to say. Fear of the unknown, right? Excitement being in a place where a lot of Americans had not had the opportunity to travel. Yugoslavia under Tito and even after he passed, was still relatively open in terms of tourism. But I don't think it was a common destination for most Americans. We did have two ethnic Slavs in our group. I think one was Croatian and one was Serbian and one even spoke the language, so he was useful to have around. But we ended up getting separated, and he went to Sarajevo.

Q: What's your first memory of arriving in Mostar or do you remember something specifically when the bus was pulling into the city?

SMITH: I do, because the UN headquarters is sort of the eastern end of what was the confrontation line between an East and West Mostar. The amount of damage to the city was striking. It was a lot of small arms fire damage to stucco and concrete buildings that kind of look like decomposing sand castles. They have been struck so many times with bullets as the two warring sides exchanged shots, typically over the Neretva River, which runs through the city. But then there were areas where the confrontation line diverged from the river. So, that was striking. And the presence of graveyards in the city centers, because it was unsafe to get out of their protected areas to bury people, meant that you saw graveyards crammed into areas that used to be parks. So those kinds of things were striking and sad.

Q: What were your duties when you were stationed there? What were you doing day to day?

SMITH: Once I arrived in Mostar, they gave us a choice of stations. Of course, none of us knew anything about any of the cities where we were going to. I chose Stolac, along with another American who joined me there. Stolac was about 45 to 50 minutes from Mostar. It lay along the inter entity boundary line, which is the line that separated the Serb entity from the Federation entity and Stolac AOR covered both sides. There were two smaller villages on the Serb side and then Stolac and some other smaller Federation villages on the Federation side. Mostly they were all Croat dominated, because there has been an extensive amount of ethnic cleansing that occurred when the Federation turned on itself and the Croats and Muslims started attacking each other. Stolac was 75% destroyed during the war. So when I see images, for example, of Gaza today, I'm kind of brought back to how it looked to see the destroyed buildings. It had been largely depopulated, from a city of about eight or ten thousand before the war, there were about 2,000 Croats living in it, and then 40 Bosniak returnees, mostly elderly people who were living in a UN designated pilot project area. The UN station at that time, because there was so little habitable space in the city, was a collection of convex boxes that were converted into office spaces. We had a bathroom box, a shared kind of work room box, and then there was an administrative box surrounded by a fence. We had a half a dozen vehicles. There were 25 of us, and at the time eight local staff, language assistance. We were under command of a Swedish officer who then proceeded to integrate me and my partner into the role of the police station there.

Q: What were some of the conversations you guys had? More generally, in the sense of what's going on in the country and sort of the peace implementation process. Whether they were depressed, whether they were excited. I'm just curious about what was sort of a mood in that room, because those people live through that war, and then suddenly, you're building and working with those people and people coming from all around the world to help them.

SMITH: It's accurate to say they lived through the war, but most of them were young. These were mostly young women who were bilingual in English and native language speakers. So during the war, I'd say about two thirds of them were teenagers. They had been evacuated to the Croatian coast, so they weren't experiencing the battles as they occurred. There were three older women who were from the Serb side, and most of the conflict did not occur on the Serb side, those towns and cities were intact. Some had been displaced persons and they'd been living in different parts of the country because of the issue of internal displacements. Where Serbs were leaving areas dominated by Croats and Muslims and of course, that operated a bit around the country. So, for example, in Stolac, a large number of the Bosniak population had fled to Kakanj, Bosnia. Conversely, a lot of the Croats living in Stolac had fled from Northern Bosnia. So you had cities flip flopped in terms of their population. It was a challenging atmosphere. Everybody, especially the DPs, displaced persons, were conscious of the fact that they were living in somebody else's home. And there was always a tenuous sense amongst those people that their housing would end and that they would have to return to their former communities.They were fearful of what the political situation was going to be like for them in areas dominated by a rival ethnic group.

Q: Can we talk a little bit about those ethnic problems? Did they persist? And how was it being in the crossfires of those different ethnicities? Still, in a very hot area. I guess the hot conflict just ended with the Dayton Peace Accords, but still, the grievances and anger remained.

SMITH: The war ended, but some of the tactics didn't. When we got there, there were 200 police officers in a city of 2,000 people, and what they really were was a militia that was designed to intimidate any rival ethnic groups from returning to Stolac, whether they be Serb or Bosniaks. And that's replicated all around the country.We share stories when we get together for contingent meetings, and people elsewhere in the country, unless they were in thoroughly dominated areas that had always been held by the majority ethnic group that was living there at the time, if they were in one of these contested areas, things were strange and out of proportion. One of our roles, in fact, was actually to reduce the size of the police force to a size that was consistent with a democratic model of policing. So we took it from 200 officers to 40. And then the next role was to integrate Bosniak police officers back into the Croatian dominated police force. That's a really long discussion.

Q: I'm curious about your responsibilities. What were you guys started with?

SMITH: It was ensuring that the local police were actually police, and that they were enforcing the laws fairly and equitably, a crime against a rival ethnicity would actually be treated as a crime and not a political act. So we had assigned an investigator who had his own language assistant and driver just to deal with those kinds of issues. In addition, freedom of movement was a big deal, the police were notorious for setting up checkpoints along the UN authorized travel routes, because mining was a problem. Still, they would set up checkpoints that were ostensibly traffic enforcement, but what they really were was to keep rival ethnic groups from coming into or crossing across their area of responsibility. So it was an intimidation force for that purpose. We were in charge of conducting weapons inspections, too. They were allowed to have certain types of weapons and in certain numbers based on the ratio of officers that they had. And we were there to make sure that they didn't have automatic weapons or weapons of war stashed in police arsenals. That sounds like a big deal, but pretty much every weapons inspection we conducted was found to be in compliance, probably because they hid the weapons from us so we didn't know where to find them.

Q: Did you guys have arresting power? Did you arrest people?

SMITH: We did not. We didn't have that authority. All we could do is write reports that would be then sent up the chain. And we did go through three police chiefs in the time I was there. There were terminations based on lack of effectiveness in the view of the UN, but that didn't really trickle down much to the line officers who continued to do what they wanted.

Q: Was that frustrating?

SMITH: It was incredibly frustrating. It felt like playing Whac a Mole where you solve one little problem only to find it pop up in a new location, like I said, after the war tactics change. Stolac was a pilot project community, meaning it had been designated by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) as a pilot project town for the return of internally displaced people, not just internally but DPs in general. So the UN HCR would, along with us, conduct village assessments. Take a look at the condition of villages that have been damaged and assess the amount of repairs that would be needed. Take a look at the water supply, the availability of electricity, things like that. We would leave and then perhaps a week later find that the village had been destroyed. The way they did that is they took propane gas bottles, which is very common because they don't have domestic gas service. They get the propane for their stoves in little bottles, an elongated five gallon tank you might use for your barbecue. They would place those inside the houses, then get some distance away and shoot them with rifles, and it would blow up destroying the houses. So we conducted a lot of investigations into the destruction of those places. We also conducted investigations into murders that have been conducted as we found bodies dumped in water cisterns, which they called wells. They're underground concrete line cisterns. It's a very arid region, so the availability of safe water is critical to living there, and it was not an uncommon tactic to find that a body or bodies had been thrown into the wells, both to send a political message that this was not a place he wanted to be, and also to poison the water supply.

Q: Let's go back to the powers you guys had, and powers that you didn't have. I'm curious whether that was problematic in a long term peace implementation process, whether it should have been given earlier, or whether that was making the whole issue more political, allowing the ethnic leaders to get more authority. Heading to Sarajevo and the Office of the High Representative, and everybody else who wasn't dealing with that, they had to come and step in. I'm just curious whether that sort of delay, not giving those powers to people in the field had an impact on the peace implementation process.

SMITH: Yeah, it delayed, and continues to delay. Bosnia today still operates within the peace framework established by the Dayton Accord. Christian Schmidt is the High Representative. I think he recently dismissed the President of the Republic of Srpska for non-compliance and efforts to undo the Dayton accord. I went there as a 29 or 30 year old. I think young people have a sense of impatience and a desire to move fast and effectively. I had to learn quickly that that fast doesn't really occur in these kinds of environments. The fact that it's (Dayton Accords) 30years old today shows that you got to play the long game when you're in peace implementation, and understand that there's going to be a lot of political bumps in the road as you do so.

Q: So let's go to the integration part. The larger story we're trying to say. Can you talk a little bit more about that in much more detail, and describe how the process was going, and what your responsibilities were?

SMITH: We all knew it was coming. The Federation, Ministry of the Interior; everything there is in triplicate, right? There's Bosniak. They rotate the presidency. And the education ministry, the Interior Ministry, etc, are all in triplicate, all by Serb, Croat, or Muslim. So in our region that was dominated by the the Croat Federation, their Minister of the Interior, who ended up being a convicted war criminal knew that it was coming and complied with the UN request to dismiss effectively, 160 police officers, and at the same time bring six new Bosniak police officers into the city to police the pilot project regions where Bosnia people were living. It was a tense day. We escorted a convoy of Bosnia police officers into the town center, where the police department was headquartered, and directly across the street from that were a couple of cafes. They call them Cafe bars that were really full of drunk, or, soon to be drunk, former police officers. So there was a big stare down. It was a tense moment, but we managed to get everybody inside the police department together. The police chief, at the time, was cooperative with us, and I think as relieved as we were that it all occurred without any civil unrest or injuries. The problem of integration, though, continued. It was one thing to bring them into the town. Where are they going to live? What is the work day going to look like? They got housing in the pilot project area that they all lived in, but it was temporary. They just came to live there during their work week, and then would go home where their families were on their days off. They would begin their patrols together. As we followed them or encountered them, we would find that a couple hours into the shift, the Croat police officers typically would just drop off the Bosniak officers back in the pilot project and say go home. Working with them, to get them to actually work together, it was a really long process. Croat police officers in our region, or ethnic Croats, I should say had been part of that rump state of

Herzeg Bosnia that the Croats created in Herzegovina. It only lasted for about 18 months or two years before they shut it down, but they would still wear the insignia of that, and we'd tell them, "No, you have to be in the Federation uniform." And they would do that. But then we would find them wearing the HERZIG Bosna belt buckles. Or, some guys had tattoos with her check Bosnia crests on them, or HBO, one creative military vehicle that had been converted to civilian police use had a camouflage pattern on it. And if you looked at it, it had the Ustasha use incorporated into the paint design. So again, in every way possible, they were trying to impress upon us and the Bosniaks that this was still Croatia. In fact, graffiti on the wall as you come in, on the building that was bombed out as you came into Stolac said, i ovo je Hrvastka, which means literally, and this too, is Croatia.

Q: Was it difficult? Were you targeted like when you were trying to force and implement and integrate? Was there any point that you were also considered as a target? That people were testing you and putting you on a notice? Was there even a fear that they might go after the UN peacekeepers and the UN Police force?

SMITH: In our city, that did not occur. Although, on one day, we had an assessment visit. Assessment visits were days where displaced persons were brought into the town and buses in order to visit their homes. Also, they took the opportunity often to pick persimmons or pomegranates or whatever from their old orchards, visit the graves of their relatives, things like that. Those could be tense days with sometimes boys and young men lining the streets taunting the people as they came into town on the buses. And that included us a few times. They threw stones and things at our vehicles, but that was the worst of it. We did live in the town, and we weren't garrisoned. We all rented rooms from primarily ethnic Croat families. I did and my experience with my host family, if you want to call, and that was actually terrific. They were friendly and kind people. I also think most of those families also welcomed the rent money that the UN officers brought into their economy.

Q: Talk a little bit more about those assessment days and how that would go. You said it was challenging. But I'm also curious about, just the human aspect, sort of the emotions running around and so on.

SMITH: Yeah, they ran quite high, and in most cases, they were really sad and actually solemn occasions, because a lot of these people had not been to their homes in three or four years. In many cases, their loved ones had been killed. Stolac was the scene of some pretty horrific war crimes. It was the location of a renowned bone disease hospital in the pre war days that was then turned into a torture chamber. So there were a lot of very, very high emotions when those people would come face to face with the people that they believed had been responsible for those tortures and those deaths. They were sad because they saw the state of their homes and farms. 75% of the town was destroyed. The town mosque was destroyed, the Hammam was destroyed. The Ottoman era library was destroyed. It was very much a cultural war as well, a beautiful cluster of homes called Begovina. All this, by the way, has since been reconstructed, but Begovina had been largely gutted in this. Beautiful enclaves of cottages and homes that line on the brig of a

river which flows through town. I believe, at one time, Stolac had been considered as a world cultural site.

Q: A heritage site, right?

SMITH: Correct. Well, at the same time that Dubrovnik was designated as a World Heritage Site, Stolac had also been included. So it was an area of remarkable beauty, a valley with a beautiful river flowing through it. So it was striking and sad, and I felt a lot of sympathy for everyone.

Q: So what about the Justice aspect? I'm curious, and I heard from other people that we've interviewed. Criminals walking down the streets, the people that were raping people during the war. And everybody knows that they are guilty and accused of this and that, but no one can do anything because they're too small. Society just moves on. And the neighbor knowing that the neighbor next door killed their family member. How do you build a police force where you have even a police officer that was involved in that during the war. That we're enforcing the law, and they're remaining there, but it's just they're too low to be processed, prosecuted, or there is no evidence. But the community doesn't trust the policing.

SMITH: We did vet the police officers, and people who had been accused of war crimes or were under investigation. They were vetted and removed from the police force. Some left the town. But to your point, yes, there were many people still walking the street who would eventually wind up in The Hague and in prison in Stolac, and some that are still at large. So I came there as an officer, and within three months I was the station commander in Stolac. My role kind of shifted from the day to day, from patrol to freedom of movement; frequent meetings with the Chiefs of Police, the judge, the interior minister, and other interlocutors, I think, is the UN term they like to use. It was the focus of a lot of international attention. You know, Sir Martin Garrod was the Special Representative of the Secretary General in Mostar. He'd been to our station. General Wesley Clark, the supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe, was in my station. We were under a microscope a lot, and the presence of those people was felt two years after I left Hector Gullen, who is an SAS major, most famous for having retaken the hostages from the Iranian Embassy in London. He did an undercover investigation there, and found that war criminals were still walking the streets of Stolac, and is written extensively, even to this day, on the fact that not all of these people have been brought to justice.

Q: What were the dates that you arrived?

SMITH: I arrived in June of 1997 and left in July of 1998.

Q: I'm curious about your interactions with those big names coming in through the town. Wes Clark as a supreme allied commander, or diplomats that were in charge, sitting in Sarajevo, or at the UN. Just sort of the interactions of you guys that are in the field with people that are at the higher levels of policy making. What were those interactions and how did those briefings go?

SMITH: I think that they were somewhat surprised by maybe the lack of progress. I know that Wesley Clark was friendly about it, but his question was, "Why aren't you arresting these people?" We don't have the authority to arrest those people, and even he didn't fully understand the limitations of the scope of our authority beyond the ability to write reports and urge the local police to take action in those cases. I should remind readers that Stolac is a divided area of responsibility in the UN maps. Half of my region was on the Serb side, and the other half of the region, and the more populated side was the Federation side. So I'm having to deal with cross, inter-entity boundary line issues through the zone of separation, which was essentially a political no man's land, right, that we and SFOR, the NATO sustainment force, it started out as I4, the implementation force, then became the sustainment force in my region. Those were Spanish troops, and they were very qualified.

***

SMITH: Like I said, we were recording license plates, and then we had the officers from those countries call their home countries and determined that, yes, they were all stolen cars. The joke in Herzegovina is that the tourist authority invites you to visit because your car is already there. But it wasn't just cars. We saw arms being traded. We saw what looked like human trafficking occurring. A war creates a lot of opportunity for criminal elements to use the vacuum of authority to their advantage. We knew that drugs were being smuggled across and the local police were probably receiving bribes to allow those things to pass. When you pay cops 400 Deutsche Marks, because it was still marks back in those days, a month, that's not enough to live on, so they make that up where they need to. And I'm not excusing their behavior, but a sure recipe to corrupt cops is to underpay them.

Q: That makes sense, because I also hear stories about, even Russian soldiers going to Germany, stealing cars, bringing them to the country, and then from there, who knows where they went.

SMITH: We actually had to dismiss two Russians and one Ukrainian for their involvement in black market activity. The whole other side of this is that all police are not created equal, right? The UN model of multinational policing is problematic. If they're not in the country, doing the recruiting, vetting and testing themselves, the host, the donor countries, will send whoever they want into these UN missions. So we found the quality of officers varied widely. The level of competence could be really good and it could be very low. And we found even Superintendent grade officers coming from Asian countries who are really coming just for the mission subsistence allowance, which was life changing money for them, because at home, they don't make any. In addition to that, because they're so highly ranked at home, they don't have to do day to day police work. They didn't know how to operate computers. They didn't even know how to drive, because they had drivers, or if they could drive, they couldn't drive manual transmission cars and all the UN trucks and SUVs or manual transmissions, so they were pretty useless. I always had to pair them up with typically American or Western European

officers who could fill those training gaps. We could maybe try to squeeze some use out of them. But in terms of your example of Russians, IPTF members being involved in auto thefts, that's absolutely true. And we witnessed it, reported it, and had an officer removed for it.

Q: What was your most challenging day that he had over there? Is there one in particular?

SMITH: I think the return of the Bosniak officers and the firing of the 140 Croat officers. When I tell my friends about it here, I'd say it must be akin to what integrating the Selma Alabama police department must have been like for the National Guard and the first black officers who were hired there. A potentially really ugly thing. Something that really still remains a problem in Bosnia today based on what I read. For example, the school still operates a double bell schedule so that children only cross paths between classes. They have separate lunch periods, they have separate instructional classes. Although, I think outside of the structure of the school that the children spend a lot of time with each other. It's really kind of the lingering legacy of their parents' experience in the war that dictates that kind of situation in the city.

Q: Okay, all right, so let me stop here, and we'll stop the interview at this point.

***

Q: Today is November 7, 2025. This is part two with Steve Smith. Steve, can you tell me a little bit about lessons learned from your time in BiH [Bosnia and Herzegovina]? Let's start with the big picture.

SMITH: Well, outside of mission orientation, the pre-deployment at a conference center in Texas, and then being sent to Zagreb, for the UN [United Nations] orientation, and then getting deployed to the region, there really was no further training, it was an ad hoc system up to the local station commanders.

When I arrived there, that meant just pairing new monitors with more experienced ones on patrols. So one of the lessons I learned early on was that that was an inadequate system. You needed to have a structured training program in place, squire the people around to all the key areas geographically within your region, introduce them to their local police counterparts, to the military in the area—in our case, that was a Spanish brigade—and then better assess their understanding of what the mission is, what our capacity was, and what change we could affect.

I learned early on that a lot of people, they just sort of drove around for eight hours and, at the end of the day, would write a report that—essentially, it became an open joke—said everything was “calm and quiet.” That was consistent phraseology. There’s “calm and quiet,” I guess, because you don’t really see anything, or it’s “calm and quiet” because you’re not looking for anything. American officers and a lot of Western European officers come out of a community policing orientation where engaging with stakeholders in the community comes natural to us.

That's not so the case with a lot of the officers who were seconded from other places around the world. That's not to be a criticism of who they were, it's just sort of the nature of policing in a lot of other countries; it is a more paramilitary model, less community engagement. To the best that we could, we started training them up in community policing techniques, engaging with the community, actually talking with people, not just sort of driving around, sightseeing, and occasionally encountering a local police patrol.

Report writing was wildly inconsistent, so we needed to improve that. And we really needed to encourage them to actually write. There seemed to be a hesitation on a lot of the officers' parts to more accurately record what was going on. The rule seemed to be "shorter was better," but it really wasn't.

As we were able to make inroads in that area, we were able to become useful in other areas. For example, in Stolac, where our station was headquartered, the water system actually came from wells on the Republika Srpska side. There were constant water flow issues and water being shut off. And it was actually us that brokered the idea for a meeting between both sides to come together, and we used our station as the meeting place for that. UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] people came, OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] people came, and we had what was one of the earliest dialogues over a water delivery issue. That's not unusual from a community policing standpoint, but it was very unusual for a lot of the officers from other places.

Q: Was there anything that surprised you? Even maybe retrospectively, looking back. Was there anything, any moment, that you were like, "This was actually strange, different, surprising"?

SMITH: I guess it's how you define "surprise," because the whole thing is really alien to me. My mother was British, my dad was American. We traveled a fair bit in Europe, but it was just as a tourist. Becoming embedded in another country, in another culture, who spoke a different language, was surprising, and it was surprising to find out how much of your day you really needed to dedicate to just sort of taking care of yourself, which was really weird, because we were not garrisoned—we lived off the local economy in a town that was 75 percent destroyed.

Also, it had 75 percent of its shops destroyed. Making sure my people had enough to eat—sometimes the very most basic things took up a lot of my day.

And I know that's not from a big peacekeeping standpoint, but to any policymakers who are talking about deploying an international peacekeeping force, or a police force, to a country, they need to be thinking about what that deployment is going to look like and how they're going to actually mechanically make it happen. Not just finding places to eat, but finding places to live in a town that was 75 percent destroyed, and we had to find places for twenty-five police officers.

We had to set up our station. When I first got there, we were in Conex boxes [cargo containers], and while driving around town we noticed some unused portion of the local hospital, which had been reconstructed. So I reached out to the local administrator of the

hospital and said, “Would you consider renting us space?” And he said, “Absolutely,” that would probably bring some welcome hard currency into his budget.

And then I had to manage getting the UN [United Nations] to buy on, which really wasn’t difficult, but again, a lot more logistical things—setting up the power source, the communication systems. We communicated via satellite and radios, etc. It was all very time consuming.

In addition to that, moving our language assistants around, who didn’t have cars and lived on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line [administrative line dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska], was a logistical issue. We had to send a car over to the Serbian side three times a day for every shift to pick up and deliver language assistants from their side of the Entity.

When you think about being a peacekeeper, you think, “Hey, I’m going to put on the uniform, and I’m going to get out there and engage with people and get them to comply with Dayton.” And you find out that you’re spending a lot of time just on logistical things, and that surprised me. I was able to spread that out over time, spread that workload over to people, to other officers, as they got up to speed, and it became easier, but that was one of them.

The other surprising thing was that it’s one thing to have a country as a signatory to a peace deal; it’s another thing entirely to implement that on the ground, to change behaviors, to try to overcome ethnic and cultural and religious—in some cases—hatred. That’s the nuts and bolts of implementing peace, and that’s the really hard part, in all honesty.

And really, it’s why I reached out to you guys to begin with, because I’m really familiar with Holbrooke’s book [Richard Holbrooke, U.S. diplomat and chief negotiator of the Dayton Accords]. Like I said in my earlier interview, I even briefed Wesley Clark [General Wesley K. Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe at the time] at my station in the region.

The big-picture look that they are getting, from wherever they are, in The Hague or New York or Vienna, to what it’s like on the ground—especially in a really challenging area like Stolac was, because we were a divided Entity; my AOR [area of responsibility] crossed both sides, and that wasn’t the case in a lot of stations.

It made for a more complex environment, it made for a more challenging environment, made for a more exciting environment, and it made, ultimately, for a more rewarding environment. But it’s really, really hard and really, really slow work, and you’ve got to be patient.

Q: Was there a day at any point throughout your mission that you’re like, “Oh boy, the work can restart,” just like, “We’re failing with the implementation”?

SMITH: I don’t feel like we were failing with the implementation at any point. Even on bad days, we’ve sort of adopted a phrase you hear more and more now, “failing forward.” We encountered failures, but we found ways to overcome them.

We monitored the police more carefully and more closely. Instead of doing randomized patrols, we were bumper-to-bumper sometimes with the local police patrol, staying right on top of them. For example, the Croat officer couldn't just dump off his Bosniak counterpart at a coffee shop and drive away and then not come back for hours—that they actually had to patrol together.

Q: Was there—speaking of failure—was there a day when you were, "This is actually a very good day. We've actually achieved something"?

SMITH: Yes. I would say there were a number of "best days." One was the first local elections that were held in the fall of 1997, supervised by the OSCE. We were on the security side of things—we were not armed, obviously, but our presence added a security element to it, being present at the polling stations, following the ballots, once they were collected, to the regional election centers, things like that.

Seeing that happen, and seeing Bosniaks return by the busload to Stolac—because you had to vote in person—and for many of them, that was the first time that they had been back. And we pulled that off, along with our partners, of course, successfully, and it was a really rewarding day.

I'd say the next rewarding day was the integration of the police force. When I got there, there were 140 Croat police officers that were essentially a militia. We took that number down significantly, reduced it by about one hundred officers, and then we integrated six Bosniak officers into the new police force, along with the new uniforms and the Federation-approved vehicles—all those things. That was a really tense day and ended well. And even the local police chief and I, we actually had a coffee together afterward and exhaled together, "Wow, that went surprisingly well." We were proud of that.

It didn't mean there weren't more obstacles down the road. For a long time, the Croatian officers didn't want to drive in the Federation vehicles. The Croatian vehicles were blue and white with the checkerboard on the door. The Federation cars were black and white with "Police" written on the doors, so the Croats would only drive the blue and whites, and that was a violation.

And I warned and warned and warned them that they had to stop using those vehicles. And I gave him a deadline, and I said, "If you didn't stop using them, I was going to confiscate them." And the day came and they were still there. They hadn't been turned over to the Ministry for repainting. They were still in use by the officers.

So, with the cooperation of the Spanish brigade, we hooked cables to the bumpers of the cars and dragged them out of the police station and took them to the Spanish camp where, by the way, they remained rusting. The very last time I was in Stolac, they were still sitting out in that field, rusting away.

Sometimes you had to take aggressive action, and it was terribly unpopular with the local Croatian police, especially. But we pulled that off, and there was no retribution or recriminations on my officers. I value that as a successful day.

Towards the end, Stolac was a pilot project community in that it was identified by the

UNHCR as a community of return [a priority municipality selected for organized refugee/minority return]. Because just over 8,000 Bosniaks had been ethnically cleansed out of Stolac.

When I arrived there, only forty families were in what was called the "pilot project area," which was a small section of the central part of the town, mostly elderly people. Over the course, beginning around January of 1998, we began to conduct assessment visits. NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and the UNHCR, along with us, were conducting village assessments, checking to see what condition they were in and what they needed for repairs.

And then the trucks started coming and dropping off supplies. And people started moving in, especially when the weather warmed up, and they would just camp as they rebuilt their houses. We stationed officers in those areas, even sometimes just parking our vehicles in the area to give the impression that the UN was present, even when we were spread a little bit thin, to try to provide some umbrella of security to these people who were returning for the first time after being cleansed out of there in 1994–1995.

So those were really good days, and seeing those people come back to the villages they were from—it sounds melodramatic—but visit the graveyards of their ancestors, pick pomegranates from the trees and olives from the trees and things like that. It was really meaningful for them, and it was a heartwarming period of time for all of us.

Q: Looking back, if you compare your first day when you arrived versus the day when you left, what are some of the impressions—what are some of the thoughts looking back?

SMITH: I was proud of the year that I spent there. I was proud that I didn't leave, because Stolac—being such a destroyed town—it was a rough town to live in. There weren't a lot of comforts. A lot of officers looked at our fellow officers working in Mostar, which is quite a big city and had supermarkets and even movie theaters functioning.

Our colleagues working in other parts of Croatian-controlled Herzegovina, especially around Medjugorje, where the level of infrastructure was really, really good—because tourists would travel there because of the Medjugorje pilgrimage site. So a lot of guys looked with envy on the guys who had a much more comfortable mission, and many didn't really last in Stolac; it really just got to be too much, too isolating.

I'm not patting myself on the back, but I committed to staying the whole year. And a number of other officers who passed through the mission also stayed their full deployments. The French only came for six months, as did the Dutch, but others—Scandinavians—came for the full year. Those officers were really the backbone, as other officers cycled in and out, which was another big—forgive the term, I think the Marines would call it a "time suck."

It generated a lot more work because we had a constant churn of new officers coming, new people we had to train which—remember I said—we had to spend so much of our days just dealing with ourselves. And that churn of officers did that, or caused that.

A big lesson would be the UN really needs to knuckle down on those kinds of behaviors amongst their staff who are just really trying—in many cases—feather bedding, and trying to collect their MSA [Mission Subsistence Allowance] as comfortably as they possibly could and do the minimal amount of work as possible.

When you try to address that, sometimes you encounter opposition from their colleagues who may be higher up in the mission, who don't want to see consequences befall their people while they're in mission, and that became a bit of a challenge. The UN isn't perfect. The old joke is, "It's not perfect, but if it didn't exist, we would reinvent it in almost the same way."

As an institution in and of itself, it's got its own issues. Anybody working inside of that framework is going to have to be ready to deal with that bureaucracy.

Q: Were there days when you were frustrated?

SMITH: Oh yeah—yes—really, really, really frustrated, especially with the bureaucratic issues. I expected obstructionism from the part of the political players and the officers in the community, but I didn't expect as much of a challenge from within the organization itself.

Q: Why do you think a regular American should care about that area of the world and your actions then—meaning in the '90s, when you were there—and also today? Why is there that care part for American society? Why should we be investing and sending people over?

SMITH: Yeah. I mean, the lessons of the 20th century resound there. The Balkans have always been a pretty challenging area. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo was maybe the spark—probably World War One would have begun another way had that not occurred. But the problems of the Balkans tend to spill out into the surrounding areas.

Europe is small—it really is. It's a day's drive to Vienna on the new roads, and ferry boats to Italy, and an easy run down to Greece and Turkey. I think it's important that we encourage stability in the region and other regions where we politically conclude that it's in our best national interest to ensure peace in the region.

I would say the same thing, obviously, about the Levant today—Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan—an equally challenging area where there's a huge collision, probably even a bigger collision of cultures and religions and ethnicities than there are in the Balkans, but I think really similar.

And again, that's one of the reasons I reached out. I think that there's a lot of lessons in the UN peacekeeping mission and CIVPOL [Civilian Police], in the SFOR [Stabilization Force], and before that IFOR [Implementation Force], when it comes to implementing any lasting peace in the Levant.

Q: What would be some of the lessons learned for someone that is planning to do similar type of work somewhere, in Ukraine, whether it's down in the Middle East or anywhere

else. What would be a piece of advice?

SMITH: Prepare for physical discomfort, firstly. If I'm looking at this in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you need that bottom foundation taken care of, because until that's taken care of, you really can't do your work. You need to know where you're going to sleep, where you're going to bathe, where you're going to get your food, what you're going to wear, and how you're going to move around.

So all that really basic nuts-and-bolts stuff has got to be taken care of before you can start to move up that pyramid and start to address the more challenging issues in the area. Those issues are going to be different area to area, community to community, depending on who the stakeholders are that you're working with.

So an open mind and an idea towards flexibility, because what was working in Stolac wouldn't have worked in Čapljina, which was the station nearest Medjugorje, because that's a completely different dynamic going on. And we were the nearest two stations to each other, and we really couldn't have been more different in terms of how our missions unfolded and what the challenges were.

Not saying it was easier. They might have been more physically comfortable, but they also had really challenging issues. But they were different. Change will be constant. Victories will be few, but hopefully increase as you progress. And ultimately, after a year or two on a mission, you hopefully leave it better than you found it.

Q: Anything else on this part of BiH, before we move to your next stage in your life? And then we'll go back to the lessons learned.

SMITH: I think you also need to be prepared for when you return to the United States—or wherever you come from—that people are not going to understand what you experienced when you were there. You're going to find yourself experiencing a certain amount of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], because you can't look upon those things and not be affected by it.

You might not be the victim of an armed engagement or have to experience battle, but the aftermath of battle and the hard, hard attitudes that you're going to encounter from the people who did experience that is going to have a really profound effect on you. I think you're going to need to continue to maintain contact with people who have similar experiences, frankly, in order to keep your head on straight, because most of your colleagues—unless they've been in a similar situation—have no idea.

Q: That's true. All right, Steve, let's stop here, and then I'll wait on your resume, and then we will get into our observation missions.

End of interview