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## Peacekeeping mission's lessons remain with injury lawyer

Before passing the bar, he passed through Balkans, gained appreciation for U.S. justice

BY EMILY DONOVAN  
Law Bulletin staff writer

Being stationed in a conflict zone made Aaron D. Boeder appreciate the American legal system.

As a peacekeeper in a volatile region of the Balkans, Boeder got a sense of the challenges a community faces when war and violence tear away basic social structures.

"God forbid your neighbor tries to kill you or move you out of your house, the police and courts hopefully will come in and protect you," he said.

Today, Boeder, an associate at Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard P.C., handles medical-malpractice cases. But 12 years ago, Boeder commanded a platoon in Kosovo while serving in the Army National Guard.

"It was the ultimate leadership experience," he said.

Boeder entered Reserve Officers' Training Corps in 1999 while studying at the Ohio State University at a time when almost no ROTC graduates earned combat experience patches, he said.

Then Sept. 11 happened during his junior year. By the time he graduated from Ohio State in 2003, the U.S. was in two major wars in different theaters.

To his surprise, he wasn't sent to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan. After training at Fort Knox in Kentucky and then in Hohenfels, Germany, he was stationed at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo.

A few years earlier, U.S. forces had been stationed there as part of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization effort supporting ethnic Al-

banian separatist groups in a fight against the Serb-majority Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

As the war ended in 1999, NATO countries and other allies left peacekeeping forces in Kosovo to stabilize the situation.

Between 2003 and 2004, Boeder was a platoon leader. He was also an executive officer, meaning he was second in command of his force.

"Basically, we were sheriffs, if you will," Boeder said.

He said he wanted his unit to leave Kosovo better than when the peacekeepers got there, while still remaining safe.

He said it was a great experience in his early 20s, but it would be even harder now that he has a wife and kids.

"You do miss people," he said. "And you miss life in your country."

His then-girlfriend, now-wife Irini Boeder called the same 1-800 number every day at the same time to make sure they got to talk.

*"[W]e had a lot of guys who were firefighters and policemen. They had civilian jobs, which made us, I think, especially effective."*

There weren't many distractions while deployed. He didn't have his family or a social life, so he got up, exercised and worked seven days a week. "What else are you going to do?" he asked. On the days he didn't go out into the field, he planned missions. It became routine.

His unit's goals were to protect ethnic Albanians, Serbs and Roma



Aaron D. Boeder

from fighting, to help repopulate locals displaced from their towns by the war and to facilitate some sort of reconciliation.

"These people lived together before and there's got to be some sort of hope for the future," he said.

His former boss at the law firm, retired partner David J. Pritchard — now of counsel at Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard — took note of the same skill set, albeit in a very different working environment, back in the U.S.

"Both sides would have felt they were being listened to, which is really the first step in trying to bring two factions together that are split widely apart emotionally," Pritchard said.

Boeder said a peacekeeping mission is not the iconic vision of a typical military operation, but his unit was made of uniquely qualified men.

"I've got to be a realist: The job in the military is to fight. A soldier's job is to break stuff and win a war,"

he said. "Why the National Guard was so suited for what we did was we had a lot of guys who were firefighters and policemen. They had civilian jobs, which made us, I think, especially effective."

Reflecting on his time abroad, Boeder said he became grateful for American rule of law. Americans can go to the court system and get justice in a way that he didn't see

happening in Kosovo.

"I was there observing these events and I came back to America and realized how lucky we are and how interesting it is that we can have so many protections, so many rights and a legal system that I think generally works," he said.

At the end of his deployment, Boeder moved to New York to live with Irini. They've known each other since they were college freshmen. Irini said studying the law was the right next step for Boeder.

"He believes in justice for people, and I think that's part of why he wanted to be in the military in the first place," she said. "He has a really strong respect for our country and it makes sense to go into the legal practice."

The couple moved to Chicago so Boeder could attend DePaul University College of Law. Boeder met Pritchard during his second year while dealing at the championship table of a Chicago Bar Association Texas Hold 'em poker charity tournament.

When Pritchard had a job opening a few months later, he thought of Boeder. His military record signaled he would be dependable and honest and his high grades meant he was obviously bright.

"To work on those cases, you have to be very organized and thorough and that probably came from his military training," Pritchard said.

Irini Boeder said her husband is still a "guru" at logistics and organization. When they go on a road trip, she piles all the baggage and tells him, "Do your Tetris magic in the trunk."

Being organized, Boeder said, is a part of him now. When he gave operations orders to his platoon, he would follow the same five-paragraph format: What's the situation? What's the mission? How can they execute the mission? What supplies and support do they have to do it? And, finally, who's in charge and how are they going to command the attack?

He thinks about his cases that way, too — planning out how he could present a case at trial as many as three years down the road from the first day.

"It's like in my core now," he said.

edonovan@lbpc.com