

25th Anniversary of Kosovo Peacekeeping Mission

As part of a large NATO-led force, U.S. troops helped keep the peace in the Balkans for nearly 15 years

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This month marks the 25th anniversary of U.S. troops' participation in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, a conflict between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Liberation Army. U.S. troops became involved in the conflict on March 24, 1999, with the launch of the NATO-led Kosovo Air Campaign, also known as *Operation Allied Force*. The air campaign would last until June 10, 1999.

The next day, June 11, U.S. troops first entered Kosovo on the ground. A small contingent of 55 troops and 20 vehicles arrived and began securing the designated U.S. zone in the east and southeast areas of the country. It marked the beginning of *Operation Joint Guardian*, the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.

“The United States was able to commit most of the elements from Task Force Hawk, the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), and an advanced contingent from the 1st Infantry Division that was flown in from Germany to Macedonia and then convoyed into Kosovo,” according to the Army publication *Operation Joint Guardian: The U.S. Army in Kosovo*.

The U.S. element in the mission was designated Task Force Falcon. Most of the units comprising that task force served six-month tours and came from the following Army divisions:

- 1st Infantry
- 1st Armored
- 101st Airborne
- 82nd Airborne
- 10th Mountain
- 3rd Infantry
- 28th Infantry (Pennsylvania National Guard)

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- 38th Infantry (Indiana National Guard)
- 40th Infantry (California National Guard)
- 36th Infantry (Texas National Guard)
- 29th Infantry (Virginia National Guard)

Marines and sailors involved were assigned to the:

- 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit
- 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit

‘GAVE EVERYTHING WE HAD’

The U.S. troops were part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force, or KFOR, that included troops from 39 countries. The mission was originally known as *Operation Joint Guardian*. In 2004, it was renamed *Operation Joint Enterprise*.

U.S. troops received recognition for their participation in the conflict with the VFW-qualifying Kosovo Campaign Medal, which then-President Bill Clinton approved on May 3, 2000. It covers service in Kosovo from March 24, 1999, to Dec. 31, 2013.

Later in 2000, another VFW-qualifying award was approved. On Sept. 20, the Marine Corps announced that it had authorized the Combat Action Ribbon for Marines in Kosovo. To be eligible, a Marine must have served there between June 9, 1999, and Jan. 27, 2000, and faced direct hostile fire.

However, an update to the award’s criteria no longer required the Marine to return fire, which had previously been the rule. According to *Marine Administrative Message 436/00*, a Marine must have been “in compliance with the rules of engagement and his orders by not returning fire.”

It was a nod to the tenuous peace keeping nature of the mission.

“One of the great advantages that the Kosovo mission possessed was the opportunity it gave many soldiers to learn how to operate in a demanding peace-enforcement environment,” according to *Operation Joint Guardian: The U.S. Army in Kosovo*. “The American force had come to Kosovo to stop the horrible violence afflicting the province’s Albanians. In short order, however, those victims became the victimizers.”

While just a part of a much larger force, the U.S. troops involved were dedicated and committed to their mission.

“We gave everything we had to fulfilling our tasks and could remember hundreds of small successes,” wrote Army Lt. Col. Timothy Reese, commander of Task Force 1-77th Armor. “We saved many lives, prevented the killing of many others, delivered life-saving aid to tens

of thousands of people, and did our best to get Serbs and Albanians, Catholics and Gypsies to work together for a brighter future in Kosovo. And for the first time in the lives of Kosovars, they experienced a conquering Army that did not loot, and rape and kill. It did not seem arrogant for me to think about the line in the biblical Beatitudes: Blessed are the peacemakers.”

This article is featured in the 2024 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), director of publications, publisher and editor-in-chief of VFW magazine.