

## **Long time plant manager struggles toward a brighter future**

**(1 of 3 entries)**

**By Master Sgt. Thomas Hayes**

### **POWER**

**STRPCE, Kosovo** — Milan Stojcetovic, dressed in layers, his hands buried in his blue down jacket, offers no apologies for the temperature of his office. It is see-your-breath cold. While the presence of KFOR has stabilized the Strpce area and allowed greater freedom of movement, the winters since 2000 have been fraught with inconsistent electricity leading to freezing cold offices, he explained.

Stojcetovic is director of the Lola Systems metal fabrication plant in Strpce. He has been with Lola through its heyday in the late 1980s through the ethnic conflict and the resultant NATO bombing campaign in 1999. While he has developed a thick skin, he said it is frustrating for him to watch his skilled workers and expensive machinery sit idle in the cold stillness of the power outages. What few workers remain, huddle around small wood stoves for warmth.

Without electricity there is no heat and no way to power the drill presses, band saws, lathes and other machinery necessary for production, Stojcetovic said. The machine tool plant was named for Ivo Lola Ribar, a writer and fallen comrade of Yugoslavian dictator Josip Broz Tito. In its day, the plant manufactured components for metal forming machines, miles and miles of piano hinges to customers from all over the world. The former USSR was one of its largest customers, Stojcetovic said.

“After the Soviet Union collapsed, the market dropped,” Stojcetovic said. “We had problems finding buyers, but we managed somehow; finding customers mainly in Kosovo. Right now, we’re making anything from metal that buyers order.”

Buyers order sleds, chairs and tables, steel fences and gates, production of “boot washing buckets” for Multi National Brigade East soldiers, and signs for KFOR, Stojcetovic said. There are also specific one time refurbishing projects like sealing kilns or welding a piece of metal.

But that’s not enough, Stojcetovic said.

In the 19 years he has been with the company — the last six as director – Stojcetovic has built strong relationships with suppliers and clients by paying on time and delivering on time. Because of that relationship, he said he has buyers lined up to purchase from him. But there’s the rub. Because of the lack of consistency in electricity, and therefore, a lack of production capability, he said he is hesitant to enter into contracts where circumstances may prevent him from delivering.

And, knowing the current situation, potential buyers are reluctant to engage in mass production contracts.

There is also the issue of privatization. Lola Institution is the holding company, but in 1993, the company began privatization plans and employees purchased stock in the company. With the downfall of business, the debt became insurmountable, so the creditors now claim ownership. The question hangs over Stojcetovic of who actually owns the company. He would like to see the company sold and turned around.

A further complication is bureaucracy. Stojcetovic said, on behalf of the company, that months ago he submitted documents which would allow him to sell to Serbia. These documents have not been approved or rejected; they wait on someone's desk.

At the moment, all Stojcetovic can do is wait. He waits for the power grid to be reliable, waits for the documents to be signed, waits for business to boom.

"You can always make something," he shrugged.

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## **Playing the hand you're dealt**

### **By Master Sgt. Thomas Hayes**

President Sladan Ilic sits in the third floor office of the Strpce Municipal Building. It is the office he occupies on a rotational basis with his two deputy presidents. Office space is limited, but hope for a better future is not, and these three newly elected officials say they have the passion to bring it to fruition.

The November municipality elections catapulted the former Olympic skier, and two academics, to their respective offices. Ilic, a 33-year-old Serb, and his deputy presidents, Albanian Hamdi Aliu, 31, and Serbian Slavisa Staletovic', 37, form an ad hoc government founded on a common cause.

In an inverse of the rest of Kosovo, Strpce municipality is a predominantly Serbian and a minority Albanian constituency.

During the last election two years ago, the Serbs boycotted, which put Albanians in power, with Serbs positioned in a parallel government to strike the balance. The boycott begat an era of indecision and, both sides agree, was a strategic flaw.

"An empty seat cannot vote for you," United Nations Mission in Kosovo's Charles Messier said. Messier, who has been a political advisor to the municipality, said that he

had advised the Serbs not to boycott the previous election, but the hardliners did not want to yield power. Messier said he has high hopes for the new democratic government.

Ilic, Aliu and Staletovic' are unanimous in describing the situations they face: Unemployment is high and what employment there is is skewed to the Serbs; Serbs do not feel safe traveling outside the Strpce municipality; Albanians are cautious about returning to their homes in Strpce and the frequent electrical blackouts are problematic.

All say they are in agreement that KFOR has done wonders to stabilize a volatile situation. And from that stabilization the hope is a foundation can be built that will revitalize their tourism industry, provide more jobs and a safe and secure environment. That goal drives those governing Strpce.

Five months ago Ilic, the entrepreneur and seven time Yugoslavian national alpine skiing champion who competed in the 1992 Winter Olympics, entered the realm of politics.

"I wasn't satisfied with the changes that happened in our community," Ilic said. "It didn't reflect enough good changes and my expectations were much more than what happened. Because of this my friends, who were also not involved in politics – they were doctors and professors – and I decided to establish one local movement, a democratic movement, with local aims and goals to achieve better for our community of Strpce."

Ilic, known as "Borzan" to his friends, said he doesn't like to lose and wants the Strpce municipality to win as well. It is the same competitive spirit that carried him through ski gymnasium (secondary school), through university with a degree in economics, a one-year stint in the Yugoslavian Army, through forming his own ski school and starting a ski rental business. That same spirit propelled him into the political arena.

"I am fighter; this is from sport," Ilic said in English. "I don't want only to be part of competition, I want to win always. I believe in God and myself and with faith in myself and my team, I know we can achieve."

The list of achievements is long, but it focuses on the revitalization of the tourism industry and infrastructure that must precede such revitalization.

"My team and I expect more safety," Ilic said. "Not only physical, but economic as well. More jobs for the community. To use our competitive advantages in our

community, by which I mean our ski resorts and our natural advantages to promote tourism in both winter and summer. Of course we have another potential in small factories. We will push the private initiative — small family businesses.

“History teaches that big social and state enterprises are the way to develop society,” Ilic said. “We need more private institutions and enterprises. Our goals are to cooperate together. Those aims are not possible to achieve without cooperation with international communities, especially KFOR.”

The key, according to Ilic, is to put aside the differences of the past, determine common interests, and pursue them together.

“We need a more stable political situation with Albanian and Serbs without any tension,” Ilic said. “At the same time we need to build our infrastructure to help both sides.”

Infrastructure such as improved roads, water, schools, electricity and telephones, he said, reinforces the common interests between Albanian and Serbian communities.

“We are neighbors and the interests will be common for both sides and this is enough,” Ilic said.

“I am trying to play open cards with the Albanians,” Ilic said. “We don’t need to love each other, but we need to respect each other.

“Now we establish a strong base for the future,” Ilic said. “The war was three years ago and both sides need time to solve the problems of the past. I want to be president for both sides.”

However, Ilic said not to expect him to be something he is not. He is Serbian. In Strpce, Serbs are the majority and Albanians are the minority.

“Now, here I want to show Albanians how it looks to lead by democracy,” Ilic said. “To show them that we will not abuse the fact that we are in majority.”

And Ilic is a realist, he said, and embraces reality.

“I will not allow discussion of the future of Kosovo within our municipality,” he said. “It is not our question, not our problem. We were elected to solve local problems not waste time discussing the future of Kosovo.”

Vice President Hamdi Aliu, an Albanian, agreed.

“President Ilic said that we are an example to the rest of Kosovo, and I support that recommendation,” Aliu said.

“Kosovo can only advance if people are considerate and have respect,” Aliu said through a translator. “But, the solution is very complex. Everything is connected to everything; for instance, electricity is connected to the economy. People need to depend on each other.

“From my position, I am a person who loves nature and loves people,” Aliu said. “I am a young person and I do not have prejudices. I will work for the interests of the people in the municipality of Strpce.”

Serbian Deputy President Slavisa Staletovic’ is also on board.

“Both sides, the Albanians and the Serbs, need to be open and honest about what happened in the past and then work to overcome the things that happened in the past,” Staletovic’ said through an interpreter. “Without this discussion we’ll never have a future.”

Both Staletovic’ and Aliu have such discussions.

“I think he and I have a good relationship,” Staletovic’ said of Aliu. “It is good we are both younger and we are concerned about the same things. For both sides, the main concerns are unemployment and better living conditions.”

So, the three unite for success with the common goal being the common good.

“The only way to go to the future is to accept the reality,” Aliu said. “So we live in Kosovo, we work in Kosovo and we wish all the best for Kosovo.”

## **All about the Benjamins**

**By Master Sgt. Thomas Hayes**

While the Powers that Be execute the “Unfixing” strategy in accordance with the transition to civilian authority, soldiers deployed to Kosovo have an opportunity to

develop a fixing strategy of their own. Financially speaking, this deployment is an opportunity to get one's financial house in order.

There are several programs at the base camps that can help. Ranging from a high interest bearing savings account to longer-range retirement programs, these programs offer a painless approach to getting ahead.

But before one looks to the future, one must investigate the present. For instance, does it make sense to put money into a high interest account, when your credit card debt carries an even higher interest? Short answer, no. But, another school of thought is yes. Both are correct, but the key is discipline.

Carey Perks is a financial advisor for the Army Community Services at Camp Bondsteel. From his "Admin Alley" office he helps soldiers experience the joy of financial freedom. If you're building your financial house, he's one of the hardware stores. Cost for his services? A couple of hours of your time.

The first step is to assess where you are. ACS can help you with a net worth statement; basically, what you have minus what you owe. Then you track spending habits: How much do you spend a month? How much do you spend a year on gift giving? The numbers will surprise you. Most people don't factor in seasonal expenses, Perks says.

"How many men remember their anniversaries by having their wife roll over in the morning and say, 'Happy Anniversary,'" Perks says. And then the husband has to scramble for a gift. All these have to be accounted for in financial assessment and budgeting. For example, if the total you spend for birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, Valentines Day is \$3,000, then one must factor \$250 a month for that into budgeting.

That's the first and most painful part, the realization of what is going out. That's also where the game begins. You can look at these debts as targets. You have three credit cards. Work on paying them down and killing off two by cutting them up, canceling them and saving the lowest interest one for emergencies.

Deployments like this are a target rich environment. It's time for reconstitution. And if your money is your ammo, you need to allocate it against the targets. Your high payoff targets are the high interest charge cards and loans. Look at those bills, credit cards, and loans. At times this may seem a daunting task, like being surrounded, but when you are surrounded, at least you know where they all are.

You've got six months to get your financial house in order, or at least the foundation built. So now you know where you are. Now, you need to know where you want to go.

"Don't get into anything before you have an emergency fund and renter's insurance," Perks says. "So if something happens you don't have to cash in the investment dollars to cover the emergency."

After the emergency fund, Perks's preferred vehicle is Mutual Funds.

"We tend to think that soldiers are better off in a managed fund, rather than getting into the stock market directly," Perks says. Mutual funds have automatic and systematic deductions to grow your investment. There's usually a charge, or *load*, that pays the institution to manage the funds.

For the long-range part of your portfolio, there is the retirement account. "One of the things we are pushing for is the Thrift Savings Program. I can't find a good reason not to invest in it," Perks says. Currently, soldiers may contribute up to 7 percent of base pay into this program, which is similar to a 401K. Can't afford 7 percent? That's okay.

“My advice is don’t put more dollars into a retirement plan than you can afford to kiss goodbye,” Perks says, “Because that’s really what you’re doing. You’re giving away your control until you’re 59 ½-years-old.”

A painless way to do this, Perks says, is to do it when you’re getting pay raises. The military pay raise in January should be 4.1 percent, so invest four percent into TSP and you won’t feel the pinch – the January pay check will net about the same as the December pay check.

It is important to realize that the first four years a soldier is in the Army he or she receives on average ten pay raises (anniversary pay, January cost of living increases, and promotion). Deployment increases like hostile fire pay and family separation pay, for example, also add to the pot. The key is to put that money to good use.

“Young soldiers can put away a lot when they’re single and can scale back when they’re married,” Perks says, “and at least they’ll have that money that is already there compounding and compounding again towards that retirement date.

“Most of our young soldiers will admit that they waste a lot of money and if they sign up for something like TSP (Thrift Savings Program) where it comes out of their paycheck before they see it, after a couple of months they won’t miss it,” Perks says. “It is more or less a hidden program where they know they’re contributing, but they don’t painfully lose it.”

Capt. Steven R. Smith is the Detachment Commander of the 106 Finance Company. He recommends both the TSP and Savings Deposit Program.

“The key thing to remember about the TSP is it is a retirement plan similar to a 401K, so you can’t touch the money until you reach 59 ½,” Smith says. “The money you put into it every month lowers your taxable income.”

“The best time to do the TSP is sooner rather than later,” Smith says. “There is the time value of money, which means the more money you put in at an earlier age, especially if you are doing it monthly, will build up to a lot more money later on.”

Smith is adamant about ridding oneself of high interest debt before one gets into a program.

“Taking care of high interest debt has to be the first priority,” Smith says. “People need to be paying off those loans prior to even thinking about doing anything additional with their money.” Once that is manageable, then one can look ahead.

For deployments like these, there is an added bonus in the Savings Deposit Program. A first deposit into the program can be made on the 31<sup>st</sup> day on the ground. The program has a 10 percent interest rate, which is more accurately calculated at 2.5 percent every three months applied to the average balance of those months. The money is guaranteed, which is more than one can say for the stock market. An important tip: Make your deposit before the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month so you’ll get the interest for that month.

“I would recommend that anyone who has the means to participate in the savings deposit program do so,” Smith says. “My first deployment I didn’t participate in the program, but this time around I definitely am. Especially with the stock market so crazy, I feel safe with the return without worrying about a decline.” Perks agrees. “If you are a young soldier why not put a few bucks aside?” he says. “You’ll never be sorry. It can be

painless to save if just start saving now and banking pay raises. That's the whole thing about saving, make it painless on yourself."

And don't wait. Perks offers an alternative to Smith's philosophy. "I think too many people say, 'when I get out of debt I am going to start saving,' and Americans don't ever get out of debt," Perks says, "so I think it is smart to teach yourself to save while you are dealing with those debts. It needs to be a healthy blend of saving and paying off debt."

Finally, keep the wallet closed and learn to say "No." Disciplining yourself with an allowance is something most financial counselors recommend.

"Soldiers spend a lot of money. People find ways to spend money even down here, and here's an opportunity to save that money: Pretend you didn't even get it, put it away and earn some interest on it," Smith says. "Or just spend all the extra money and miss this opportunity."