

A COUNTRY
TORN
BY WAR



My night amid the madness of war as a boy waits to kill his countrymen

THERE was no water to wash the blood out of the armoured carrier and no one wanted to sleep there.

Some of the men burrowed down in the grass at the side of the road as Corporal Karl took watch.

He put on his helmet with the camouflage leaves. This, of course, was a joke and he grinned as the canvas foliage flopped over his face.

In the forest and fields up to 200 Slovenian fighters had us in their sights like ducks in a shooting gallery.

That was how it felt on road E70 with the survivors of the battle of Krakovski Gozd. This Yugoslav army unit was a sitting target and no camouflage could disguise the fact.

"A bad position," Karl said, making a face as he stared over the cornfields and meadows. "How many guns do you think they have on us?"

Too many. The Slovenes destroyed three armoured personnel carriers from this column of 12 during a day of fighting in which two Yugoslav soldiers were killed and four were wounded. "My friends," Karl said.

He told how he was asleep in his "wagon" when an anti-tank rocket smashed into a carrier nearby. It was dawn. As men tumbled out in shock they were machine-gunned.

The Yugoslavs called in an air strike, but as they fought along E70 towards the safety of the Croatian border their column was again halted by the fire power of Slovenian defence forces.

"It was hell, man. Real hell." Karl is 19, and his excellent English owes a lot to the American films and music he adores. He is a rock musician. He played me a few imaginary chords, holding his automatic rifle like an electric guitar and strumming the magazine.

As it grew quiet on the road, Karl's voice softened and he told me about his home in Bosnia, and how he had only six months left of his national service. We both knew it was the next six hours that would count.

The Slovenes had said they want a ceasefire but the men in this column were convinced that if they tried to move again they would be wiped out.

On the radio we heard that a column of tanks was



KEITH DOVKANTS
reports on the battle at
Krakovski Gozd, Slovenia

heading from Belgrade to smash the Slovenian resistance. Although it seemed this may be the only hope of relief for Karl and his comrades, the news dismayed him.

"I do not hate the Slovenes. We did not come here to kill anybody. This is all madness. Why don't they let us go home?"

There was an echo of childhood in his voice. He turned 19 in January and, under the grime of the battle and the aging of fear, he is a boy just a few months older than my own son.

I was seized by an urge to pull off the stupid camouflage helmet, to throw away his rifle, and march him back to his parents in Bosnia.

Karl was right. This is madness. These men are waiting to kill or be killed on the edge of a ripening cornfield in the heart of Europe, a few hours' drive from Vienna.

I had made my way here through the Slovenian positions, walking along 200 yards of the road with my

hands held high, fearful of renegade snipers. The Slovenes are angry over what they see as an attempt to suppress their just struggle for self-determination, and for them Karl and his comrades are an occupying force.

The Slovenian leaders claimed the column had to be halted because it threatened the nuclear station at nearby Krsko, but this does not make sense.

Would the Yugoslav army attack a nuclear reactor on what it still considers its own territory? There is no more logic to this than there is to a 19-year-old rock musician standing on a road in his own country with a hundred guns pointing at him.

Down in the grass a soldier lit the remains of a cigarette just half an inch long and offered it to me, explaining that when it is finished he is definitely — but definitely this time — going to give up smoking.

There are few occasions when one truly does not know whether to laugh or cry. This was one of them.

