



“How do you
thank someone who
**saved
your
life?**”

Seventeen years ago, a rescue worker brought a desperately wounded child out of war-torn Bosnia. Now, the two meet again **By Ronnie Polaneczky**



Photographs by Jensen Larson

Maja Kazacic paces back and forth in a sparsely filled waiting area at Tampa International Airport, her smile belying her nervousness. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling," says Maja (whose full name is pronounced MY-uh Kuh-ZA-zitch), a petite 33-year-old, distractedly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I've been practicing this reunion in my mind for weeks, trying to decide what to say when I see Sally. What words can describe how grateful I am?"

Maja stops for a moment and looks serious. "I just hope she likes me," she says. "I hope she feels it was worth risking her life for me."

On the other side of the terminal, Sally Becker, 49, has the same jitter as she hurries onto the airport's shuttle train to the waiting area where Maja is pacing. The last time the two were together was in 1993 in war-ravaged Bosnia, where Maja, then 16, had been critically injured in a bomb explosion. Her right leg was mangled; her left one had been amputated just below the knee in an effort to slow the massive infection that threatened her life. Nerves and muscles in her left arm and hand were damaged. And there was no way the makeshift hospital she was in could cope with her injuries.

"If she didn't get proper hospitalization, she had only days to live," recalls Sally, a lanky brunette who at the time was a volunteer relief worker from England trying to transport injured children like Maja out of the war zone to medical care. "I remember meeting Maja and she smiled this gorgeous smile. We didn't speak the same language, so

and by local media, who got wind of the reunion and are jostling one another for the best camera angles. Also in the group is Sally's 10-year-old daughter, Billie-Jo, who traveled with her mother from England.

Maja and Sally seem oblivious to the hubbub, barely able to keep their eyes off each other. The initial rush of their meeting has calmed, and now they are recounting for everyone how they met and all that has happened since.

It was August 1993, and the city of Mostar had become a battleground in the Bosnian War. The western part of the city was controlled by the Croats, who had driven Bosnian Muslims into the eastern, unprotected side of the city. This was where Maja's family lived, trapped between the Serbs in the hills behind them and the Croats just a few streets away. Cut off from regular food, water, electricity, and medical supplies, they were starving and terrorized by bombings and mortar attacks by the Croats.

But children are children, whether war rages or not, and that day Maja and five friends were enjoying a warm afternoon in the courtyard of the apartment building where she lived with her parents and younger brother. Maja was sitting on a low wall when a rocket-propelled grenade hit their play area, knocking her backward. The air filled with acrid smoke, burning her throat and eyes. She tried to stand and couldn't—her legs were bloodied, "a red you'll never forget," she says.

She could see severed limbs, chunks of tissue, scattered around the courtyard. One young pregnant mother lay dead, her lifeless toddler beside her. Another teen knelt in

"Will I still be able to play soccer?" Maja asked her father after the grenade explosion. "Of course," he lied. "You'll be fine"

that's how she communicated—by smiling." Sally exhales deeply. "I'm worried that seeing me will bring back terrible memories for her," she says as the shuttle speeds her toward Maja. "I don't want to cause her pain."

When the electric doors slide open, Sally hurries from the train, her dark eyes darting from face to face in the terminal until she sees the smile that grabbed her heart 17 years ago. The two women rush into each other's arms and hug. They pull away, start to speak, and cannot. Instead, they gaze at each other, overwhelmed by the magnitude of a moment that—one terrifying day long ago—seemed unimaginable.

"One minute, I was this kid in Mostar, dreaming about playing professional soccer," says Maja. "The next minute, my whole life changed." She is sitting next to Sally in the waiting area, their arms linked. They are surrounded by Maja's friends, who have accompanied her to the airport,

death where she had stood just moments before, her body propped up by debris, her eyes frozen open.

Maja alone survived the blast. The father of one of her dead friends rushed her by car over a pitted road to a former water-testing lab turned hospital. There, she met up with her own father, a medic. "I asked him, 'Will I still be able to play soccer?'" recalls Maja. "He said, 'Of course! You'll be fine!'"

But over the next few days, without surgical attention to her wounds or antibiotics to fight the infections that set in, she became gravely ill. She lapsed into unconsciousness—a blessing, given her level of pain—but woke to find herself in the midst of a horror. Her gangrenous left leg was being amputated without anesthesia. To this day, Maja doesn't know if a real doctor performed the surgery. "I was tied down, and they had a rubber tube in my mouth for me to bite on," says Maja. "I could feel them sawing my bone,



"That's the only picture I now have of me with two legs," says Maja, who, before the war, enjoyed fishing at a river in her native Bosnia. Today, thanks to a special prosthesis, she is just as active, running and playing tennis and golf

back and forth, back and forth. The pain was unbearable. I felt it in every nerve of my body."

Later, when dead flesh was carved away from the wound, she clenched a blue teddy bear in her teeth to help her endure the agony. Miraculously, she survived the barbaric procedures. But another kind of miracle was needed to save her life.

The stench of death was overwhelming," says Sally, describing the conditions in which she found Maja at the makeshift hospital. "The floor was slippery with blood, drip lines dangled from hat stands, and patients waited on endless lines."

Sally, an artist at the time, was living in the south of England, where she was following the plight of civilians caught in the war. Wanting to help, she went to Bosnia and, entirely on her own, not working with any group, brought food, water, and medical assistance to the elderly Jewish community in West Mostar. The Croats didn't allow foreign aid workers into the city at that time, but because Sally was Jewish, she was seen as neutral.

She had been providing aid for three months when a U.N. representative asked her to help get permission for the evacuation of a lone medically needy child out of East Mostar, the besieged side of the city. The Croats gave her the OK to evacuate all wounded children and mothers, even loaning her an ambulance and putting a cease-fire in place. She had less than 24 hours to carry out the rescue; after that, shelling would resume. Nonetheless, Sally's ambulance was shot at repeatedly by snipers.

Finally, shaken but alive, she arrived at the hospital. "Maja was lying on a stretcher in the basement," says Sally. "But as sick as she was, she radiated strength. She smiled even in her pain."

It had been weeks since Maja had been injured, and she

was near death. By then, her father was also a patient at the hospital, having sustained head and chest injuries in a grenade explosion. Her mother spent her days darting between the two, while also trying to care for Maja's younger brother at home.

Sally was to evacuate Maja as well as four other wounded children and their mothers, but unexpectedly, a tactical maneuver by the U.N. threatened to derail her mission. The U.N. had brought a humanitarian-aid convoy into East Mostar, and it had been trapped there for almost three days—prevented from leaving by local Bosnians who wanted its protection. The U.N. workers tried to use Sally's mission as a means of negotiating their own release, and there was a standoff: The U.N. wouldn't let Sally leave without them, but the Bosnians wouldn't let the U.N. leave on Sally's coattails. "I was outraged," says Sally. "The cease-fire was running out, the children were in grave danger, and now the U.N. was trying to use those patients as a means of escape."

When TV journalists started filming the argument, the U.N. group finally allowed Sally's ambulance to leave. Followed by the press, she made the harrowing four-hour drive to a U.N. compound outside the city. The patients were quickly taken from the ambulances and flown to a mobile hospital in Zagreb, the Croatian capital.

Sally was given just minutes to say goodbye to the children she'd risked her life to save. She kissed each one, praying she'd gotten them out in time. And then she started to make plans to return for others. "I'd promised a doctor I'd be back as soon as I could," says Sally, who had been horrified by the sight of such badly injured children. Eventually, she rescued 200 children from the war zone.

After initial treatment in Zagreb, Maja was flown to a U.S. Army hospital in Germany, and from there to the United States. A local chapter of Veterans for Peace—a humanitarian group of U.S. vets—had learned of her injuries and arranged for her to receive *continued on page 206*

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free medical care at what was then Memorial Medical Center in Cumberland, MD. She underwent around 150 surgeries—"I stopped counting at 100," says Maja—and thousands of hours of therapy to help her left leg stump to heal, save her right leg, and repair her damaged left hand and

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arm. For two years, she was cared for by medical workers and dozens of families from the town.

Maja had no word of her parents or brother for six months. Later she learned that her father, along with about 20 other injured patients, had walked a hundred miles to get medical care. If he hadn't, he would have died. Once he recovered, her family

began trying to get to the U.S. It took much wrangling and paperwork, but finally, they received political asylum and, two years after Maja had arrived, they all settled in Cumberland. The transition was difficult: Refugees who'd been driven from their homeland by war, they had suffered huge losses and now had to find jobs and housing and learn a new language and culture. Yet they were grateful to be

school post office, and assisting a professor. In 2000, she graduated from Saint Francis University in Loretto, PA, with a degree in psychology.

Sally, meanwhile, had become known in the media as the "Angel of Mostar" for her ongoing rescues of children and families. When the war spread to Kosovo, she continued her work there, endangering her own life over and over again. In 1998, she was

together and determined to make the best of this second chance.

By then, Maja was in high school, where she took up the cymbals and joined the marching band, the rhythm of the percussion helping her regain a proper gait. After graduation, she began attending college, paying her own way by working at various jobs—building websites, clerking in the

captured by the Serbs and sentenced to 30 days in prison.

Ironically, it was that experience that eventually brought Maja and Sally together again. After her release, Sally was watching newscasts about her capture when suddenly she was astounded to see a familiar face, speaking on her behalf. It was Maja.

"The news crew had tracked her

down in the U.S.," says Sally, still sounding amazed. "She spoke perfect English, and she looked healthy and beautiful. I was just thrilled! I never knew what had become of her."

But the two women had never been reunited before. It was the Hanger Orthopedic Group that arranged the meeting. Maja was one of 45 amputees in the United States testing Hanger's new micro-processor-controlled prosthetic leg, V-Hold, which continually readjusts the pressure on her residual limb. The mechanism closely mimics the movement of a real leg, so that Maja can run and play golf and tennis—her favorite sports—without the pain she experienced with her old artificial leg. And within the next year, she hopes to walk 70 miles—from Mostar to the

Adriatic Sea—to raise money for prostheses for Bosnians who need them.

"I'm now 33, the age Sally was when she rescued me, and I want to help the world the way she did," says Maja.

Not that she isn't already doing her part. Her friends in Palm Harbor, FL, where she moved after college, call her "Bosnian Unlimited, Inc.," for her work with refugees in the Tampa Bay area—helping those from her homeland find jobs and become U.S. citizens. Maja herself owns Vela Business Solutions, a company that develops websites—and she is in demand as a speaker, sharing her life story as a way to help others achieve their dreams.

Sally still lives in England and has remained committed to humanitarian projects. When the war ended in Kosovo, she established trauma-relief centers there for women and children, and in 2006 she traveled to the Mideast to help victims of the Lebanon/Israel conflict. She is involved as a

Goodwill Ambassador to Children of Peace, a multifaith charity dedicated to building friendship, trust, and reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian children. And she devotes more of her time to her original calling—her painting—and to daughter Billie-Jo, "the love of my life," she says.

But now it is Maja who holds her attention. The two will spend a week together in Palm Harbor, and they say they can't imagine ever being out of touch again. "Maja keeps saying she has to thank me for what I did. But what else was there to do? It would have been a tragic loss for the world if she had not survived," says Sally.

Elsewhere, there are new wars and natural disasters and injured children. But this afternoon, a courageous woman and the child she rescued, now a generous-hearted young woman herself, allow us to believe that everything can be made right in the world. ■