

Foreign Deployment (November 2, 2006)

Abstract

In November 2006, Corporal Björn Uwe Schulz was about to become one of nearly 9,000 Bundeswehr soldiers stationed abroad. A reporter for the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* followed him during the three months he spent preparing for his deployment in Afghanistan.

Source

Schulz Goes to War

How a twenty-year-old corporal from Berlin is being prepared for the mission in Afghanistan – a story from an army that has gotten used to foreign deployments.

When the time comes, he'll stand up and take his helmet, just as he has done so many times in his mind. He'll line up with other soldiers, many of whom still have boyish features, and, as always, he'll stand out in the crowd, pale as the moon, red hair, soft features, a thin beard on his chin. On November 10 at 0800 hours, Corporal Björn Uwe Schulz, twenty years old, supplier in the Armored Infantry Battalion 421, formerly stationed in Brandenburg on the Havel, now detailed to the Cologne-Wahn airport, will board the gray Airbus outside on the runway: destination Uzbekistan. From there, Schulz will be transported in a Bundeswehr Transall to Afghanistan, to Kabul. The flight will end in a steep dive to avoid possible enemy fire. For four months, Schulz will be part of the ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force, an army of soldiers from thirty-seven countries, an army that is supposed to bring peace to Afghanistan. With weapons.

His mother will cry again when she says goodbye, and Schulz will tell her to stop again, like a teenager who is slightly embarrassed by his parents. That's how it has been for weeks between mother and son. The quiet family suffering behind the news reports, which grow more confusing by the day.

For forty years the Bundeswehr was barely visible in everyday German life. It did its time in the woods until the Cold War came to an end, without a single shot ever being fired. But now here's Schulz, born in 1986, laden with his field kit and responsibility. Schulz, an ordinary German. Schulz, like Müller, Meier, Schmidt. One of the nearly 200,000 young Germans who have already served abroad. On the day that Schulz will board the plane, 9,000 Bundeswehr soldiers will be serving abroad, in Afghanistan and Bosnia, in Kosovo and Congo, off the coast of Lebanon and in the Horn of Africa, as observers in Georgia, Eritrea, and Sudan. Their missions have unwieldy names – ISAF, KFOR, EUFOR, UNIFIL, UNMEE, UNOMIG, acronyms as complicated as the world itself, with all the dirty conflicts that the Bundeswehr is supposed to bring to an end. Politicians have, in their usual fashion, found more appealing ways of putting it; they speak of “humanitarian,” “peacekeeping,” and “peace enforcement” operations, and ever more frequently of “robust mandates,” especially in Afghanistan, where the Bundeswehr, in the new era of small, hot wars, has suffered twenty-one of its sixty-three casualties worldwide. It's as though we stopped paying attention for a moment and “heading out,” “conflict resolution,” “protection,” and “putting yourself in harm's way” suddenly became part of German everyday life. And smack in the middle of it all is Schulz. How did he get there?

At our first meeting, Schulz is nothing but a name and a very short resume taken out of the desk drawer of his company commander: Schulz, Björn Uwe; born on May 23, 1986, in West Berlin; single; high school diploma; son of a gas station lessee, retail salesman specializing in minerals and lubricants; class B, C1,

and C driver's licenses; hobby: precision mechanics. And he's the one who said he'd be willing to allow *Die Zeit* to follow him on his way to Afghanistan, for three months, until his flight out.

It is August. The country, still decorated in black, red, and gold^[1], and still savoring the World Cup euphoria, is worked up about Günter Grass's belated confession that he once belonged to the SS. Reports of Bundeswehr soldiers getting caught in heavy fire in the Congo can't compete with this surge of emotion.

Schulz and his company have moved into their quarters in Saxony-Anhalt, in Klietz on the Elbe. The barracks are white and quaint, like an open-air museum. But the bulletin board warns of dangerous developments: the Elbland Terror Organization (ETO) is gaining power with the help of the drug trade. Elbland warlords have divided up the country among themselves, women are being oppressed, men are being executed; there are repeated attacks on Bundeswehr patrols. The soldiers really only control the capital of Stendal.

Since morning, Schulz has been running on an "infantry route" through this make-believe Afghanistan, where the smell of goulash wafts over from the mess hall kitchen. His drill sergeants have built four stations here, a test run for the fight against terror. They stand under birch trees with stopwatches. Schulz has to assemble a rifle and recover an injured soldier. He has to say, "I am standing 500 meters south of the command post and have identified two enemy riflemen," encoded for radio transmission, and then solve a military quiz: How many lines are there on a march compass? How many cartridges fit into a P8 magazine? What is the battle cry of the 1st Company? What does PAGNAAPPF stand for? There won't be time for long words in Afghanistan. Schulz has to run, run, run, his feet flap as he runs; he has huge shoes, size 15. His gun dangles on his back; the summer sun has reddened the back of his neck. You can tell that he's having fun here.

"Outside you're on your own, people are indifferent," said Schulz during a break after being asked why he decided on the Bundeswehr. "Outside you're on your own" – that's one of his very first sentences, delivered in a throaty Berlin intonation. Schulz is sitting on a bench in the sun, still struggling to catch his breath. His voice is surprisingly soft for his large body. He has been in the military for eleven months now; he's one of those who, when talking to buddies, disguises the word "fear" behind a protective wall of terms like "respect" and "attention," and at first he comments only laconically on his decision to participate in the mission: "It doesn't really matter to me whether it's Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, or Iran." Schulz speaks of himself as though he were a character in a film whose plot would inevitably lead him to Kabul. You notice that right away with him, and with all the young soldiers here who stamp the mud off their boots during lunch break as though they had just come from the soccer field.

You can spend days asking the soldiers in Schulz's company about their worries and no one will say anything. Anyone who leaves Germany's discourse society and visits the Bundeswehr – the direct participants in the new global scenario, the rank and file – embarks on a journey into a culture of demonstrative indifference. That's probably the only way to become a soldier. Probably the only way to remain one. But you also start to get the impression that, for many, the army is protection against what Schulz calls "the outside."

Schulz stands up; he's got to get back. The next exercise is called "guiding a helicopter." Schulz stands in a field waving his arms. He already knows that he has been detailed to the ISAF Camp Warehouse in Kabul. His commanding officers have assigned him to the supplies group: new weapons in, old weapons out. Schulz will be fighting a matériel battle for peace while his comrades go on patrol, train police officers, and protect development aid workers. Schulz will shuttle back and forth in his armored Fuchs transporter on the "Purple Route" between the camp and the airport. Twenty minutes from one Western watchtower to the next. Between them: Afghanistan.

Schulz once flew there using a Google Earth flight-simulation program and crashed into a chaotic cluster of houses. His major said that it will be freezing in Kabul in November at 6,000 feet. Right now Schulz is kneeling in the fluttering shadow of a tree. The days in Klietz are like sports camp. In the end, Schulz places ninth in his group of fourteen. Birds are singing in the trees, and Schulz is surrounded by the soundtrack of peace. The deployment is still far away, like a distant thunderstorm.

In the meantime, in a tract of forest fifty miles farther east, worrisome news has reached the Bundeswehr mission command headquarters near Potsdam, where high-ranking military men coordinate the global deployment from a command center that is impervious to wire taps: in Afghanistan, the frequency of attacks is increasing. The Taliban is back. The status reports don't categorize the country as green, like Bosnia, or yellow, like Kosovo. Afghanistan is red, and red means "Situation unsafe and unstable."

[...]

When Schulz describes how he ended up in these barracks, in his room, in his uniform, it's as though everything he did since 1989 led straight to his getting lost here. In a German suburb like Lichtenrade it was easy to underestimate the world. "Life was a party," says Schulz with a shy smile that betrays how embarrassing he finds that now. But back then politics was something you learned about in school; it was history or distant and absurd world theater: "in the Middle East, for example, suicide bombers here, there, and everywhere." Schulz remembers wars that didn't look dangerous on television. "First an American jet fighter is catapulted from an aircraft carrier, and then it comes back." He didn't become aware of world events until five years ago, when he got home from school and wanted to watch Star Trek but instead saw the first tower collapse on RTL [a German television station]. And when the second tower fell, he thought he was seeing a slow-motion repeat of the first one. On September 11, 2001, Schulz felt for the first time "that the world is truly evil." Half a century of affluent tranquility and global standstill had come to an end.

The word "globalization" was everywhere in the media, and in school Schulz heard how few jobs were available out there. Politicians spoke of the Bundeswehr as an "intervention army," and Schulz enlisted for basic military service. When he became a recruit on October 1, 2005, Germany had long been caught up in global competition, not only economic, but also political, demographic, and military.

[...]

Three weeks before his flight out, the word "Afghanistan" is being used so much in the Armored Infantry Battalion 421 that everyone has just started saying "Afga." Now it's mid-October and Schulz is pushing a shopping cart through the barracks. He has to go to outfitting. He was given a slip saying that he is to receive "two field jackets, tropics" and "two pairs of combat boots, hot/dry." Aproned women are waiting in a hall in front of floor-to-ceiling shelves of boots, helmets, pants. They narrow their eyes and peek over their glasses, sizing Schulz up like the saleswomen at C&A used to do; then they disappear and come back with a pile of uniforms.

Schulz traded in his old, dark green Bundeswehr "flecktarn camouflage" for the new, sandy gray "desert camouflage." He slips the color of dust and heat onto his pale body; it is the color of the Gulf wars. The Bundeswehr no longer wears the green of the German forests; it now wears the colors of the new global trouble spots. Bundeswehr [literally: national defense] – suddenly the name sounds so outdated.

Schulz has been very tired lately. He goes to bed at nine and dreams dreams that are entirely new to him: he is standing in the middle of a party. He goes home to visit his parents. He dreams about normal life. And he reads the Koran. He doesn't want to do anything wrong. He learned how to fire a P1, a P8, a G36, and an MG3. He learned how to camouflage himself with leaves, use radios, and drive a truck. He knows one sentence in Pashto: "Melgero Mellatuna – Dreesh, kah nay say dasee kavoom!," a phonetic version of

“United Nations – Stop or I’ll shoot!”

He sat like a schoolboy in a course on “Regional and Cultural Studies of Afghanistan,” so that he’d be a politically correct soldier, if that’s even possible. He has learned that Afghanistan is “a country where people are used to having less personal space,” where children will come up very close to him. He has learned that in an accident he should never touch an injured woman, even if she dies right in front of him. And that a pot on the side of the road could also be a bomb. And that the moment he looks out of his vehicle and sees that he’s being filmed could be the moment of his death, since Al Qaeda films its attacks.

Sometimes he gets worried all of a sudden. “What if I run over a sheep? Or a child?” He won’t be able to see much through the hatch of his armored vehicle. Schulz has heard, and read, and trained a lot, but in the end his life will also depend on chance. Whether he drives a yard farther to the left or right, whether the pot on the side of the road really is just a pot, or whether he’ll be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Is that war?

Schulz knows now that he wants to run a gas station, like his father, when he gets back. But first he has to get through this, and he wants to as well: “I want to show that I give a damn about the world.” Not every know-it-all college student can say that about himself.

The next morning Schulz marches with two hundred troops through a light fog to the farewell roll call. The first winter frost has arrived. Frozen breath billows in front of the soldiers’ faces. Two hundred silhouettes standing at attention, one of whom is Schulz, alone with his thoughts. He wrote a will leaving everything to his sister. Up front a colonel is speaking, “...foreign deployments are a dangerous milestone in the lives of our soldiers.... In the name of the German people...” A march is played. Schulz already sent in his annual dues for the model-making club. He still has to buy Christmas presents for his parents and cancel his car registration. His life insurance covers both active and passive risks of war. Now the mayor steps to the front, a petite woman in high heels, and she presents the troops with a Brandenburg city limits sign.

The fading out of the national anthem marks the beginning of the “snuggle weeks” for the soldiers, the mandatory farewell leave period with their families.

[...]

In the days leading up to his departure, Schulz floats in an ocean of time. He goes to Heiligenhafen with his father to do some high-sea fishing, but they abort their plans because the waves are more than six feet high. He gives his mother a brooch. Has pictures taken of himself and his sister. Gets together with as many friends as possible. What used to be an everyday routine is now “life.”

Suddenly the newspapers on display at his father’s gas station show soldiers in desert camouflage, soldiers with skulls, soldiers acting like rowdy hooligans. In Afghanistan, Bundeswehr majors rush into mosques and politely ask the imams not to conduct Friday prayers with too much anger. The Ministry of Defense wants to transfer tanks to Mazar-e-Sharif in case evacuations become necessary. Martina Schulz wrote an email to the *Bild* newspaper asking them not to further endanger her son by publishing new photographs; the response comes the next day at the newspaper stands: The media is shouting “shock!” and “scandal!” The minister mentioned “withdrawal” for the first time, albeit from Bosnia.

Schulz paints another model submarine.

He doesn’t want to be afraid now. In a few days he’ll be at the airport, on his way out of the sheltered security of childhood and into the brutality of the world. He has part one of *The Lord of the Rings* in his backpack. He hears his mother’s pleading voice in his head: “Make yourself invisible.” Good wishes from

friends and family are written on his helmet: “I miss you already,” “Come back soon,” “Big sister is watching you, Anica.” So he’ll wait there, Björn Uwe Schulz, twenty years old, a soldier from Germany. Despite his fear of shots, he has been immunized against polio, diphtheria, hepatitis, meningococcal disease, measles, mumps, German measles, influenza, tetanus, typhoid fever, and rabies.

On Friday, November 10, shortly before 0900 hours, his plane will take off and gradually disappear into the autumn sky above Cologne. There will be no announcement in the news. But his mother will still have the radio on.

NOTES

[1] Black, red, and gold are the colors of the German flag – trans.

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