

# **GORAN BATALIJA**

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Interview conducted in Vitez

**There, it is on. For the purpose of general Praljak's defense we will primarily talk about your activities during years 1992 and 1993, so I would like to ask you to only give information based on your knowledge and the way you remember it. That is, to emphasize if you are giving information you have heard from someone. For start and only for the recording purposes, could you please state your first and last name, date of birth, father's name and current address and then we can proceed.**

Which current address, there are many.

**Where do you live ?**

Goran, Karla Batalija, date of birth 15th of December 1962, I live in Vitez.

**What is your occupation?**

I am retired now.

**Retired, and before the retirement?**

I was an active pilot before the retirement.

**Active pilot. So, according to our data...**

Aeronautical engineer.

**According to our data, on the territory of Central Bosnia, helicopters were used to transport the wounded...**

That is correct,

**...and to administer humanitarian aid, or whatever was available. Were you involved in these activities?**

For the most part.

**Could you please tell us more about these operations, who employed you, how this happened, what was your take off site?**

I was employed, by no one actually, because I was a member of HVO. And since that blockade in Central Bosnia in April of 1993, then in September we got an order to move south to Herzegovina, I cannot really say how HVO got these, through some aid or purchase, military helicopter MI8 and then at first we flew with, mercenaries would be a derogatory term, pilots from Russia. I came down south in September, and they did some 12, 13, 14 flights, I cannot say exactly. During the day we would fly with this Russian crew and I would fly with them. And then, for some reason, they did not want to stay there, maybe it was because every flight there, and we used Grude for take offs, and we would land there...

**Where was it that you would land ?**

Well, to cut things short, you can record that it was between, and these are villages, between Mušunje and Bučići there are some...

Towards the quarry ?

Well, a bit behind the quarry, further towards Bučići, towards Novi Travnik. There are some fields where a helicopter can land. During the day this was a complete disaster because we were fired at from all sides, during landing and take off and while the helicopter was on the ground. Mortar fire.

**Where did the fire come from... ?**

From the Muslim side, of course.

**Was there a red-cross sign on the helicopter or?**

Well, there had to be, because the ones they would drag to that MTS from Grude, on the return flight, the helicopter was full of the wounded. Sometimes the helicopter would carry, this one night there were 53 wounded people there. I remember that night very well, most of the wounded were children. I cannot remember the name of this woman who worked for a humanitarian organization, she was the one who collected them, there were a lot of Muslims and Serbs then.

**Was it Sali Becker?**

Yes. That night there was a lot of Muslim, Serbian and Croatian children. I cannot remember which organization she worked for exactly.

**"Doctors Without Borders", I think. Or something like that?**

I cannot remember exactly what it was. And then these Russians left, and the other ones came. They were employed by, I am not exactly sure, some Defense Office from Split. Travnik, Vitez, Busovača, Novi Travnik were included, people who worked there came through some connections, I am not sure which, as if it was some

kind of secret – you can get pilots for any kind of job you need. And then some, I know the exact names too, who flew for Russian Azro Flot airline. I started going on night flights with them. It was a bit easier because you could not see the helicopter from the ground during landing. We started flying like that from Posušje, they would do something so that landing location would be visible, we would take the wounded to Posušje. They then went from Posušje to Split and this continued until the end of February.

**Of which year?**

1994. When those Serbian planes were taken down over Jajce, four planes that attacked Novi Travnik and Bugojno. The propaganda at that time was unbelievable. If NATO did not take down those planes, the Muslims would still think that Croatian planes were behind the attacks and there was no chance for the Croatian planes to fly all the way here because of NATO.

**Yes. Because they controlled the sky?**

They did. I mean, our flying was, in a way, semi-legal sometimes. I don't know what the NATO's policy was, sometimes they just would not let you fly and that was it, we had to go back. And on the other hand, we were needed, number of wounded grew rapidly, 20 wounded daily was a very small number. I think that we transported some thousand wounded people in our helicopter.

**During this period?**

From September 1993 to February 1994.

**Those were only wounded HVO soldiers or were there also soldiers from other armies?**

Well, I think that 99% of them were HVO soldiers. We did go after the war, after 1994 when the Muslim-Croatian conflict subsided, we did go to Bugojno and Zenica too and no one cared about the nationality and the army. And the fact that we had that red cross on our helicopter, was like we had put on a target for them to shoot at.

**Before we started recording this, you said that there were also children, that you also transported children?**

Well, there was a lot of children. When I say „the wounded“, I mean everyone, we do not have any data on the actual numbers. For example, I had some 70 flights,

**70 flights?**

On average, there was 30 people inside, some were wounded, children, sick, there were some civilians.

**You transported civilians too!**

So if you multiply 30 people with 70 flights, that is it.

**Do you recall, were there any Muslims?**

There were some Muslim women, elderly people and children, that is for sure. Among those 53 that we transported that night, I know that there was a lot of Muslim children there. If you need the exact number, I think you can get it from that Sali or from the nurse Marija in Firule. I think that she has all this data, she should have it because she kept records. I mean, when we came to Split, it did not matter who came in, who came out, I did not care. All I cared about was that we all got there alive.

**How did you even start flying the helicopter?**

Well, by accident. I was here as the commander of air defense, here in Vitez, i.e. Central Bosnia. And in 1993 there was no other way to get in or out.

**Yes, you were under siege!**

Yes, there was a period when the only way out was through the mountains to Sebešč, Uskoplje and then it was no problem to go further. So this friend of mine, Miro Lovrić, he and some other people knew that I was a pilot and asked me to come because there were not a lot of professional pilots available. Later, all the pilots who flew with those Russians went away. Alright, some remained in the Croatian Air force, but they were all from Stolac, Livno, Zenica, Doboj. They were all from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Did you meet mister Praljak during the war?**

I did.

**Did you have meetings with him?**

I met him as soon as I came in September of 1993. At the time, he was HVO commander and met with us to explain what we should do, although we already knew what was required from us. We did not need further explanation.

**I will get back to the General Praljak question, but let us first deal with the issue of Central Bosnia until September of 1993. Did you do any helicopter flights there or not?**

No, we did not have any. No one did.

**The Russians were not there either?**

They were there for a certain amount of time. But that was all approved by UN or NATO. There were some humanitarian aid flights. A helicopter came from Split, maybe 4 or 5 times. But they came to get the wounded only. They were fired at just as badly, the agreement did not matter. If you had an agreement with the Muslims, a helicopter would come to get the wounded, no matter what the agreement was.

**Would you happen to know when the helicopters who transported the wounded were first fired at?**

Well, the helicopters from Split first came in July. And they were fired at immediately after that. The team saw it.

**Mladen Katalić was there then, and Drago, is that correct?**

Yes, Mladen, Drago. They came some 4 or 5 times before I went south.

**Tell me, the thing with Praljkom, what happened when he...?**

When he wanted to take off his pants?

**Yes, that.**

He always said wild things. He came and called for me, since I was the commander of this air force group, the people who came there, maybe few AERO club pilots, some who were professionals, some who were mechanics, this and that, there were maybe 20-something of us in total. At first we had 2 small airplanes for recon, few of those ultra-light ones, nothing special. And

now when we got these helicopter, he said: "Come on Batalija, get in those helicopters and fly to Bosnia, to the north!" I said: "We cannot do that, general." How were we supposed to fly to Bosnia, none of us flew a helicopter before. Some flew gliders, smaller planes, there were few pilots who flew airplanes before the war. Then he called the secretary: "Bring us two coffees!", she brought the coffee and then he said to me: «Goran, I would take off my pants right here, right now, and bend over, if only you would fly to Central Bosnia once!», I said: „It is all very nice of you general, but it would do us no good at all!». That was what happened, he was really...

**He was very eager for you to...?**

Yes, well, when the first Russians came, we had some skill to do that, because the stuff we did was totally unbelievable, the maximum distance for the helicopters was 4 kilometers, you cannot even do that with a helicopter.

**Please explain this a bit further ?**

Well, these were Russian helicopters, the American transport ones are not like that. These were supposed to fly one kilometer to the front line, take the soldiers, MTS, whatever was needed and go back. They did not fly over the line, not ever, so we were...

**Kamikaze ?**

Not exactly kamikaze, but we knew what the other side had, what was it that they could take us down with, hit us, so we would fly for 4 kilometers and then when we were over the free area, although it was very small, we would slowly come down and when we started to go down, the Muslims held the surrounding

hills, you know that.

They had air defense and weapons, 40, 20 mm guns, arrows, they would fire everything they had. Since I am from these parts, I know the area very well, I was paying attention to the marks we made if our movement would be drawn on the ground below us. So our helicopter was hit once, and it was because of our own mistake. Instead of above Večeska, I don't know how familiar you are with the map, we started to descend above Krušica, where the Muslims were.

**They were in Gornja, not Donja?**

They were up there, in Večeska Gornja, HVO controlled Donja.

**And not Krušica?**

Krušica was approximately 50/50 when we. . .

**When you descended in Krušica?**

No, we started to descend and when I realized where we were, it was already too late. You can hear the helicopter and it has no protection, thin metal, bullets go right through it, the thing looked like a colander when we landed in Grude.

**OK, and where did you load the wounded, where did they bring them to?**

They would bring them in medical corp vehicles, because we could not land near the hospital, near the church, because the line was relatively close for the helicopter to land. Even this was insane stuff to do. We would fly over the line for the first time down there over Rama, our line, then the Muslim line, then we fly there, then the Muslim line, then our line, then we would land in the middle.

And repeat all that on the way back.

And you usually did it in the night, right?

At first we did some daytime flights, then after Zabrđe fell, this hill, point above Vitez, and we could no longer do that.

**You could only do night flights!?**

And then we only did night flights. You can hear everything during the night, but you cannot see it.

**Was it technically more difficult to do night flights?**

Yes.

**Because you did not have the radars that you needed, is that right?**

No. This helicopters had only the basic things necessary for visual navigation.

**So this could be considered high-risk flying?**

Yes, the risk was certainly very high, especially at night. And in the clouds, that too. In October, November, December and January, it used to be mostly cloudy.

**That suited you then?**

Well, it did on one side, but on the other side, clouds are not all that important during the night when we cannot be seen anyhow. And it was much harder for us to fly at night, with no help from the ground, no equipment, no radar, these helicopters had none of that. They had some naval GPS devices which

would help a little, but you never knew whether they would break down, stop working, although they did work fairly well.

**Who was the doctor there that you had contact with?**

I don't know, for the most part it was, as far as I remember doctor Drago Džambas, then doctor Perić and the one who went to Tomislavgrad, I forgot his name.

**Would you contact them? How did it work, how did they know you would come, how did, for example doctor Džambas know you were coming, how did they know when to get the sick, the wounded?**

We had some codes from the World War I. I would notify them, basically on the phone...

**You would call them?**

...I would call, some code, what was needed, the way it was to be done. These were packet connections or whatever they were called, I don't know. They would call about us taking off. It would take us 40 minutes to get from Posušje to here, and that was basically enough for them to prepare.

**To prepare? And when did you meet Praljak, general Praljak for the very first time?**

He came here in 1992, in autumn, when the stuff was happening with the Serbs, in Turbet, in Travnik. That was when I met him for the very first time.

**Were you already a HVO soldier then?**

Yes

**With the air defense?**

Yes.

**He was there the whole time or did he come and go? Do you remember?**

In 1992, when the Muslims were our ally in fighting the Serbs, he came and was here for few days, that was when the Serbs took Jajce. That was the first time I have seen him here. I think it was him. I am 100% sure it was him.

**And?**

He was there for few days, I think. They took Jajce, some new lines were established north to Turbet and the things were unchanged like that until 1993.

**Were you present when he was on the line? Can you tell us about some significant event that happened?**

I saw him in a house. They were supposed to hold a meeting with some Muslims, which was supposed to happen in that house.

**You were present at that meeting?**

No, not at the meeting, I was at that house. I cannot remember what was it exactly that I wanted there, so I came to be there. He was there too, Blaškić.

**Do you remember what he was like, did he let things happen the way they were happening, or did he take things in his own hands, ask the army to do something, ask the HVO, tell them how they should do things, where they would be, do you understand?**

I don't know...

Did he just observe or was he active?

He was active, but I think that he tried to impose some standards so that it would be a regular army. You can imagine what it was like in 1992, it was not an army, it was regular people with guns!

**Tell us about that, what was it like?**

It was a joke. At the beginning, we were just regular people with guns, the loudest one would become the commander at a village, and you could create a company from that in no time, with around hundred people. There were no defined rules. However, there were a few men who knew something about the military. I was a commander, actually, at first I was the chief of that air defense unit, then I was the commander of our air defense division, and things had a somewhat military structure. Later on, as the war progressed, we started to become an army. But hardly a real army. Some men were wearing sneakers, some in boots, some in jeans jackets, some had some kind of uniform, so that it did not look like a real army. It

**People, the soldiers that would come, were they volunteers or were they drafted?**

Well, you see...

**Was there some discipline, did people listen to commands, or did they just**

**act the way they felt like?**

Well, we kind of tried to draft people, but it was more or less an army of volunteers. No one could make a soldier out of my father in 1992, when he was 55, no one could do that. But, out of 10 to 12 thousand people who had weapons in HVO, 30% of them were my father's age or older. One could not make an army out of the people like that. But these people were simply given guns, everyone knows how to shoot and sit in trenches. And the Croatian term «domobran» was really appropriate word to describe these people, for they were defending their own homes. There were some guys who were very good soldiers in this brigade or that, in the military police, I don't know where else. There were also some smaller units which did look like a real army and had uniforms. But in our region, it was an army, but at the same time it was not.

**So that was the way to qualify it? They had uniforms...?**

Yes, well their behavior mostly depended on the person who was in charge, and less on their individual demeanor.

**OK, and the people who were in charge, these were brigade commanders?**

Brigade, company, battalion commanders, and these were carpenters and locksmiths. And I do not underestimate carpenters and locksmiths, but these occupations got nothing to do with the army. There was very little people who actually had some military training.

**And your division, what kind of equipment did you have? Did you have**

**the MTS?**

Well, we had some guns. You know that there were two weapon factories here – Bratstvo and Princip. And they used to have air defense guns, 40 and 20 mm ones, for factory defense purposes. So when things started happening in 1992, those guns were supposed to be taken to Belgrade and so on. But the people said «Listen there, you are not taking those guns!» So the guns stayed. At the very beginning, we had 24 guns. We got some from Herzegovina, I cannot remember exactly how many, maybe 2, 3, 4, I am not sure. 14.5 mm, we also got some of those arrows so that something could be done with it all. However, this gun requires 6 men, that one 7, then you need two shifts, that is 12 people. We needed some 600 men, and did not have as many. So we tried to work things out, ensured what was the most essential equipment for each gun. People had to have helmets and bullet proof jackets and enough ammunition. We got the ammunition for these guns from Pravulje, because there was a warehouse there with the ammunition for 40 and 20 mm guns. So at first, when the Serbs attacked, we had enough of it. But these guns can reach up to 2 km in height, and they dropped bombs from 5 km. But we fired for the sake of people's morale, so that they would see that something was happening.

**Did all these guns end up in HVO or did you...?**

No, it was like this at first. Here in Vitez there was one battery and 12 guns, so we gave 2 or 3 to Busovača, and 2 or 3 from Novi Travnik we gave to Travnik. What was left remained here and the crew consisted of men who had any kind of connection to former JNA (Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija, Yugoslav National Army), people from air defense, it did not matter whether they were Muslim or Croatian. And this lasted until that first conflict with the Muslims in October, right before that thing in Jajce in 1992 and then

they just took 2 or 3 guns from Vitez, 3 or 4 from Novi Travnik, the Muslims got almost everything that was there in Travnik and so on...

**Did that leave you with nothing?**

No, not nothing, but there was this forced division of things.

**Yes, you were forced to divide things, and then you no longer had 24 but...**

No, we did not have 24. I know that we then gave one to Vareš. Vareš, Kladanj, I don't know what other towns. Then the Muslims used those very same guns to force the Croatian people out of Vareš, the one we gave them. Because, at least me, I did not even dream that we would be at war with the Muslims, but that is what happened.

**You did not think it would be so?**

Not at all. Because, at that time, there were no signs that such a thing could happen. We even had some coordination at that time and I am telling you, we gave them guns, to Vareš, it was no problem, Vareš, Kladanj, the line towards the Serbs was not well covered over there, they could have used 14.5 mm gun. Tiho asked me: «Would you give them those guns, Goran?» «We will give them the guns», I said, «since we have enough and they do not have anything!» And we really gave them, one could not find ammunition for it. Anyway, it was not like we were left with nothing, there were some weapons that we still had.

**You had some, but not as many as you used to?**

No, not as many. Half.

Lada, do you have any questions?

**Tell me please, were you flying MIGs?**

No, I flew subsonic planes.

**Subsonic, but you had to have some kind of training to switch to helicopters?**

Yes.

**Were did that training take place, not only for you, but for your colleagues as well?**

I had my training here in Central Bosnia.

**Exclusively?**

No, when these Russians came, they were helicopter pilots. And the first one that was here, this Vladimir, he was later killed in Moscow with some Frenchman. I heard about that later on. He said to me back then: "You know nothing about helicopters!" Well, flying is basically flying, it is not like you are switching to running. But the handling techniques are significantly different from those for the plane. And then, every time after we landed in Grude, I would practice with him for another half hour. The hardest part was taking off and landing the helicopter. The rest of it was no big deal.

**This was not official?**

No, this was something we did on our own.

**Informal training?**

Yes, informal training.

**What about the formal training, compulsory training that you and your colleagues had to have had?**

We did not have any.

**I will ask you directly: did you have any training in the Republic of Croatia?**

No.

**There was no such thing?**

No.

**But during one period, TO had MI8 helicopter training in the Republic of Croatia. You were not among them?**

No. What do you mean TO?

**TO.**

From Croatia?

**In Croatia.**

From Bosnia and Herzegovina?

**Yes, from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Do you know any names?**

Iftić.

**Iftić is a Muslim.**

Yes. I said TO!

OK, that is ABiH! Alright, they were TO immediately. They were there. I know more Muslims that were in Croatia.

**Tell us!**

Oh, I cannot remember right now, I have forgotten, but that Iftić you mentioned.

**Pečenkovic?**

I do not recognize that name. Bešlić. I remember, I was their teacher, to this Iftić and Bešlić, while I was working in Zadar. Then, OK, Begić was always there, he was some kind of coordinator.

**Salko?**

Yes. I will try to remember more names who went to Croatia. Suljić, one kid from Vitez.

**That was the team that was specifically trained for helicopters?**

Yes, they were in Croatia, but I was talking about HVO earlier. We did not go to Croatia. We had... I can tell you the names of all our pilots, Brdar and Jurišić were helicopter pilots, they used to fly a different type of helicopters so it was easy for them to have some kind of additional training to switch to this type of helicopters. As far as people from Bosnia and Herzegovina were concerned, Perić was also a helicopter pilot and he also had some sort of training, only in Herzegovina.

**I specifically wanted to know about Croatia?**

No, none of us ever went to Croatia.

**Did you ever fly based on general Praljak's orders?**

As far as him actually signing some orders...

**I specifically want to know about him. Spoken, written, orders from him to fly somewhere?**

I cannot really say that I actually have those orders. I do not have a lot of other orders, but I have told you about what his demands were like in the beginning, when we could not even fly. You can call that an order, it does not matter. Well, later, when things became more standard, there was no need for someone to write stuff for us or give us orders. We would simply decide to fly if the weather was nice. No one gave us any specific orders. There was this, let's say, general order to «help Central Bosnia» and you can now interpret this any way you want to. He was, however... well, we would mostly fly in the morning, we would take off from Grude at the break of dawn and he would call and ask us: "Did you all come back alive?" and things like that. It was only his human concern about us coming back alive.

**So that element was present?**

Of course! He would call 10 times before we landed.

**Really?**

Because we had some radio-station there on the ground in Grude, but it was no good there. When you get to 10, 15 kilometers from Grude, we could communicate with it. One day, I remember this, it was morning and we stayed some 10 minutes longer than expected, let's say it usually took us hour and half in total and we were gone for an hour and forty five minutes. And this friend said that during 15 minutes that he was there, Praljak had called 15 times. I said that we had no way of telling because we did not have a radar. We had some HVO radar that could show .

**Did you ever fly to Mostar?**

No. To Mostar? During 1992, 1993, 1994?

**Yes.**

No, we did not.

**On your flights, you would land at Split?**

Yes, I would come to Grude, fill the fuel, because we never had enough, and then we would take the wounded to Split.

**What doctors would meet you?**

As far as the doctors are concerned, I only knew this nurse Marija, I cannot

remember any other names. I think there was no one else. She was the one who did it and I know her.

**That would be all, thank you.**

**Do you have anything further that you have maybe remembered during our conversation that you think we should know? Because not even the general can remember everything that happened.**

I know, I am younger than him and still, if you haven't mentioned TO, I would not remember that part. Yes, they were in Croatia and they stayed there for a long time. That much I know.

**Did they come back?**

Yes, they came back, they all worked afterwards. When I came to Sarajevo to work, in 1996, 1997, when the Army of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was created, their Croatian was better than mine.

**And you were a member of the Army of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

Yes. I was second in command, and Salko was the commander.

**The one who had the training?**

He did not really have the training, he carried some suitcases and stuff like that. I am not sure what would be important for you to know about him. He was, for example, he once granted a permission for 2 Muslim helicopters to land in Medugorje. Do you know about that, did he tell you about that?

**I do not know about it.**

There was supposed to be some exchange and the Muslims, somewhere down there in the Mostar, Jasenice area. He said: «The helicopters will not fly until this exchange is done», because they were supposed to pick up these Muslims, I do not know what the reason was for them not to take off. However, these Muslim pilots were there and there weren't all that many of us so he called and said «Take the pilots to lunch, keep them happy!" And really, they came to Međugorje, it was wartime, there was no food in Zenica, and suddenly someone is taking to lunch to have some sea bass, some fish. Since the situation was not resolved, they stayed in Međugorje for some 40 days or so, they were staying at the SFOR base and realized that there was no problem, that they could walk around Međugorje without fear.

**They walked around town?**

Without fear.

**And the people knew they were Muslim?**

Yes. Well, they did wear civilian clothes, just in case. After some 40 days, an agreement was reached, there were some changes, HVO basically did the maintenance on their helicopters because they had to be run every few days, batteries had to be charged. When they had to go and after the war one of them said: "Man, if I knew what it was like, I would have never come back! I would have stayed a prisoner in Međugorje forever!"

**That is good.**

Like I said, it was Praljak personally who called, and he called me.