

DRAGAN ČURČIĆ

DRAGAN ČURČIĆ

PLACE

time

The deposition testimony has been recorded, and the tape has been filed under

April 4, 2006. The deposition testimony of general Dragan Čurčić. During this deposition testimony, please let us refer only to the events during 1992 and 1993 in which you participated, and only to that known to you. Also, in case you refer to occasions you heard about from other people, you should state it is an information you heard, and not witnessed or experienced yourself. With regard to all the details and events you are about to describe, please do so according to your best knowledge and recollection, as well as truthfully. Please state for the record your full name, date and place of birth, and place of residence.

I am lieutenant general Dragan Čurčić. I was born on September 1, 1965 in the village of Janjac near Zenica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently I reside in Mostar on 1a Biskup Buconjić Street. I am a military officer by occupation, because before the war I finished military high school Ivo Lola Ribar in Zagreb, which I attended from 1980 until 1984, and army military academy, the infantry, which I attended from 1984 until 1988. Two years of general orientation in Belgrade and two years of infantry specialization in Sarajevo.

You are currently employed?

Currently, I am not employed. At the moment I am in the process of settling my status in the former Federation's Ministry of Defence, nowadays the Ministry of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, I don't have a status of active nor retired...but it is being settled. I've been to court and found not guilty on the count of undermining the military and defensive power of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

So, you were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and you participated in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 and 1993! I would like to ask you to start from the beginning, i.e. to say when, where and how you operated, as well as how you came to a unit in which you were? So I hear it from you.

I had been a professional military officer even before the war, i.e. I had been an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army, serving in honorary battalion in Belgrade. Already in 1990-1991, it was clear that the YPA was not what it seemed. The Serbs dominated and the YPA was the most powerful tool used for conducting their politics in those days, used by Slobodan Milošević and, generally speaking, Serbian politics in this region. Therefore, in 1990-1991 I started thinking about leaving the army. However, the problem was that I was living in Zenica, which means there was no way for me to stay there in case I leave the YPA. I would have been arrested immediately, because the army was in Bosnia and Herzegovina the entire time. In most part, after it moved from Slovenia, it came to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The existing military power of the Yugoslav People's Army in Bosnia and Herzegovina was complemented by around one and a half division. And I did not want to leave the country and seek political exile. It was obvious that, after it ended in Slovenia and began in Croatia, the war would spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, helped by certain people, I left the YPA in the beginning of 1992 and immediately came home. One day I went to Croatia because the war there had been going on for quite some time. So I joined the 'Kralj Tomislav' unit, commanded by general Mate Šarlija called Dajida. Of course, during those first days they were really distrustful of me, since I was a man who came from Belgrade, and besides I was not a Croat from Croatia but from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The distrust was passionate. However, they tried to use my knowledge about all sorts of weaponry, tactics, preparations, in a nice way. And then, during first battles they appointed me to company's second in command. That way I joined the 'Kralj Tomislav' unit in Vrgorac in the beginning of 1992. But its structure was very specific. 90% of manpower was from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ratio was a little

over 60 percent of Croatians, while the rest were Muslims, later called the Bosniaks. At the same time, the reservists started to occupy the area of Herzegovina around Mostar, Čapljina; Ravno was completely torn down, around Livno field, etc. We began reconnaissance of those areas, because most of men were born in Čapljina, Ljubuški, Mostar, those Bosniaks were from all areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Senberija down to Podrinje, Stolac, Mostar. From all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We also began reconnaissance of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was obvious the war started spreading, and the invasion actually started. The YPA and the Serbs were already working together openly, taking over all major facilities. The entire left bank of the river Neretva. First, we came to help the village of Kruševo, because one of our members was from Kruševo. We also came to help the villagers who self-organized into some sort of a company. So we helped them.

In which part is Kruševo?

Kruševo is above Mostar, on the edge of Mostarsko blato, i.e. the villages Čule, Kruševo, Dobro selo, Krivodo, Tepčići, Slipčići. In front of them is a plateau, and then the massif extends down to Neretva from where you could clearly see the airport, because the airplanes were always taking off. So, these villagers were able to regularly report about the takeoffs from military airport in Mostar. However, then the Serbs invaded that area and the watching stopped. But we managed, together with the locals, to stop it and establish a strong line that lasted until the other side was liberated. That is where we had first major conflicts. Most of the unit, except those men who were with Dajda, defending the area of Dubrovnik, the legendary Čepikuće. As we were there and from that area, and we had probably fifty men from Čapljina, Čapljina was completely isolated, because there was a garrison, the YPA barracks, and on the other side the Serbs, Chetnics reached all the way to Neretva. The village of Tasovčići was already occupied by the Serbs, so Čapljina was completely cut off. Then in cooperation with Dajda, we decided to try to free that barrack in Čapljina.

Where exactly in Čapljina?

In Orahovine. And during the time we came there, we were introduced to general Praljko. That was a really interesting experience, because Dajda did not come with us. Dajda was a commander, but in a battle, as well as any other time, the group was commanded by late Božan Simović. And that is when we first met him. I remember we heard Praljko under the ruined bridge, i.e. the bridge near Čapljina, and we did not know who he was or where he was from. Then we met and that moment marked the clash of two great personalities, late Božan and Praljko. The communication was not good at first. Then the general... Even though he had the rank of a general at that time, we had no ranks, although we came from the Croatian Army where our status was set: squad leaders, battalion leaders.. Therefore, we referred to each other according to our ranks, although they were bestowed upon us a month after that. That was when we met, the communication was not good at first, but very soon the general realized we were the most serious company on the field, so he allowed us to plan that operation ourselves. But the fact is that when the combat activities began, in regard to the liberation of the barrack, he was at our side the entire time, and that is what fascinated Božan and me, as well as all the men. The same goes for his bravery and know-how, because he was a military officer earlier. We knew he was a commander in Sunja, but when you do not know the man, you do not trust him. The same feeling I felt until the men got to know me. In the beginning of those combat activities, it settled very soon, and we were thrilled he did not interfere too much. He coordinated our operations, the operations of those defending Čapljina, the operations of HOS, he supervised all of that. We managed to free that barrack, even though one part was freed by attack. Some fascinating situations occurred then that made us realize the war

was not just shooting, but that it involves a great deal of technique. Suddenly, we seized large quantities, two tanks and not to mention other equipment. We also captured a lot of soldiers. I remember a funny situation when one of our guys wore those military sneakers, those ugly ones... I would never take them even if someone was giving them away, and the poor guy took them. So, the general said to him: 'Why would you want those! They stink, and besides someone wore them, they are ugly! Leave them, and go and choose whichever pair of sneakers you want from the store, I will pay for them. And the guy really threw them away and said to the general 'There, are you happy now!?' Later, that guy had a great relationship with the general. But we also had prisoners, and so it happened that one of our soldiers, a squad leader, slapped one of them. He was an ensign in the YPA, a Croatian. So, he slapped him and the general really shouted at him. Then late Božan and I came, and said that no one was to touch anyone. That was the time when we started learning that war does not involve only shooting, but also some situations with captured and wounded men. We had two dead members and the guys from Sisak who came to help us also had two dead soldiers, and we also had seventeen wounded during the liberation of the barrack in Čapljina. So, that was our first realization that there was a different part of war, the one that involved using weapons, because we were afraid of the YPA airplanes and helicopters. Six of them were brought down those days. There were so many of them in the air, it was horrible. And I know that the general insisted that those boys, because they were really young, young army... I do not know exactly, but I do know that they were released very soon. I think they were not even traded for others, but released.

So, no one touched them, abused them?

No! Some of the guys did try, because we had wounded and dead soldiers and that is why some guys became emotional, heated. But that greatly depends on commanding officers. If you take into consideration the example late Božan and I were giving, they immediately lost interest in the prisoners. After that, our relationship with the general was really good. When general Dajida, who was officially our commander, came to Čapljina later after that success to see us, he was bitter that our respect towards general Praljko grew so much in such a short period. And then he openly asked us what we thought about that "director" while we were in the meeting; there were Božan, Marko Potrebica, Bozo Čurčija, Ferdo Herceg, Šok (Albanian that was in our unit) and me. And all the guys said he was fantastic, and that we were thrilled by his behavior. Our chances were good in the attack on the barrack, and their resistance was good, they were burning everything around them, tearing it down, shooting. I remember this one time when the general stood in the middle of the street in Grabovine, at the auxiliary gates and yelled into a megaphone: 'Božović, leave those children, don't let the children die! Surrender, no harm will come to you!' And the bullets were flying around him, we were yelling for him to get down. Just as we took cover, a tank tore down what was beside us. I know I couldn't hear for a while from that explosion, that's how strong it was. So, he fascinated us on many occasions, but general Dajida said to us: 'There you go, they sent me an actor, a director, all I need now is Ivo Robić'. The source of his frustration were his expectations, because he knew about Praljko's past, which I didn't know, but the guys from Herzegovina knew about his father and uncle, so he expected they would reject him like some foreign body. However, it was obvious that in a war, a man was appreciated based on his actions, and not on where he came from or who he was. For example, what I had was intelligence and knowledge, but the bravery is what counts with these guys, whether you will earn their trust or not. Relation with the soldiers?

The relation was, as I've said, that communication with regular people, because the notion everyone had about these generals before the war was unrealistic. You could see them on the TV, and there was no communication. The general comes to us as we sit in a coffee shop and makes jokes with us. But when we were working, that was something different. So, after that period, our intensive cooperation with the general began. I have to say that we always found that moment fascinating, when he wanted to listen to him, which wasn't that often, and that it was not imperative we should attack or do anything if the time wasn't right. He wasn't like most of commanders; he didn't want to go at any cost. He always waited for the right conditions to be fulfilled in order to do something. Which is logical, because a man invented the door so he wouldn't have to bang his head on the wall? And even in the moment of commanding, he wasn't forcing anything, he wasn't arrogant, but always polite. Of course, you have to earn that kind of respect with men, so they would listen to you. During the liberation of some parts of Kupres, he always came, whether he was active or not. He was always there during important operations, whether it was the defense of Vakuf, the breach into Kupres when we moved the Chetniks, he was always there. I think we had reached a stage of the most important bond in the military, and that is a conceptual bond. I remember when we freed the village of Ravno, the first one on our way to Kupres.

That was the village of Ravno from September 1991?

No, no, no! The Serbian village of Ravno.

But near Kupres?

Near Kupres! So, we occupied it, i.e. we penetrated the first defense lines set on the hills above the village of Ravno, we went down into the village and occupied it. And when the general received that news, he and Tihomir Blaškić were down there at the command center, when he heard we occupied the village of Ravno, he sent a messenger to find us and tell me and late Ante Primorac to try to occupy the village of Vukovsko. In front of the village of Ravno there is the Ravanjsko field, and after it the Vukovsko field, the village of Vukovsko (there is Gornje Vukovsko and Donje Vukovsko). But there was no chance for the messenger to get through. No one knew the way. The roads were built later. By reconnaissance we realized we could occupy that area as well, so we went there alone. And that night, when we came to a briefing, he told us he had sent the messenger to tell us to try to occupy Vukovsko, and I told him the messenger didn't find us, but that I knew those were his thoughts, so we occupied it. He laughed. Continuing operations in Herzegovina, I don't know the exact date, we freed the entire area. That means the right and the left bank of the river of Neretva. It was a fantastic operation based in great part on his capability to motivate people to put up a resistance. We have to admit it was the first big operation in every part, because a lot of armed forces from different towns were involved in it, and we were there acting as tactical unit. That was the time of the creation of Ante Bruno Bušić...

THE RECORDING STOPPED

At first, the preparations for that operation were just an idea that was hard to realize, considering the domination the Serbs had in weaponry, tanks, and everything else we experienced ourselves during battles, as well as other men who were defending their regions. As I've said, we were the only maneuver unit, and we could go anywhere. And Bruno Bušić was just in creation. However, Bruno Bušić had very experienced men.

Which one was Bruno Bušić? Which unit?

The Ante Bruno Bušić unit. It was a professional unit, later a part of the Croatian Defence Council. It was joined by men who fought in the war in Croatia, as it was the case in our unit. They were the most valuable force, because they were willing, motivated and everything, but didn't have much fighting experience. It's not easy to tell soldier's performance before you see him in a direct combat.

They were also from Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Yes! Most of those men from the Croatian Army units came; at that time there was a truce in Croatia; since the war had already started down there, it was clear the attitude needed changing. There were district-level headquarters that had their units, but not structured in a special way. They were based on the willingness of people to defend their territory. It was understandable that army in creation had no order, no hierarchical responsibility, but only a willingness to defend the territory. In time they would get better weaponry, training and organization. The situation became much better when men experienced in the war in Croatia joined the unit. The same happened with our unit; after we agreed with Daidā about the way to split up the forces, after Daidā sent one part of the unit towards Sarajevo, because that was his wish, I was the one who went up there on Igman before him and his men. A good part of our unit went up there on Igman carrying weaponry and everything, but the intention was not to stop the blockade. I believe that at that point there was no real possibility for the Bosniaks, i.e. Muslims to do that, because they didn't have the weaponry or the organization skills; they were on the defensive all the time, trying to defend whatever they could at that time. One part of our unit that stayed there joined them and was near Sarajevo the entire time. A lot of Bosniaks went fighting in Posavina. Some fellows from our unit went all the way to Goražde. The rest of us focused on freeing this territory. At that time, we all crossed from Croatia, not knowing if we were going to keep our status. Not as a unit, because we knew that wasn't possible, but keeping a status individually. So, we came, which was understandable considering the Bosniaks had gone, to defend our territory, as well as some Croats from Posavina, towards Drina, towards Sarajevo...

So, everyone went to their territory?

Everyone went to their territory.

To their place of origin?

About 150 of us were left down there, and we were the main force of liberation of Neretva's left bank, but also the right bank because it included the Hum Hill; there were also men from Široki brijeg, Convicts' Battalion (Kažnjenička bojna) that also existed at that time, then Bruno Bušić which was ready to go into battle, and later it did; also, the district-level headquarters that already had battalions formed. At that time, there were mostly battalions. There were 13-14 of them. That's the first time our artillery gathered. As a unit, we already started using the name Ludvig Pavlović, although everyone called us 'Daidā's', and then 'Božan's'. The name wasn't important, they called us 'Daidā's', and 'Božan's'. Heavy artillery had already started gathering, and of course, general Praljak did a great job motivating men, so they could

move forward against that kind of force. And especially the liberation of the barrack in Čapljina not only brought us an enormous quantity of weaponry and equipment that we always lacked; primarily cannons, mortars, three-barrel guns, Bofors guns, a huge amount of anti-armor weapons, mines, munition...; but it also had a tremendous psychological effect on the whole country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, not only Herzegovina. It resounded throughout the region. It was the first liberated barrack in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And suddenly, the adrenaline started flowing, so we could really fight the enemy and do it. The operation started and we believed, in fact we knew, that we were the main and the fastest moving force of the attack; on the other hand, the general had a huge role in motivating men to move towards Hum, helideck and also the former barrack on the way to the airport, Buna and everything else. The fighting was heavy, and at that point the Bosniaks didn't help us much. Those that were in the Croatian Defence Council units were armed and could do their job, while these didn't have any units at that time. So, they had only what was in the Croatian Defence Council. And a really fantastic thing was achieved. The area was liberated, which later motivated not only this region, but the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina. A huge area was liberated precisely at that phase of war. But it's a fact that a commander has to set a good example, even if he is a chief commander of lower-level units. All your knowledge means nothing if you don't back it up by setting an example. An example needs to be set in a battle, but also outside of it. It's important to point out that being an army in creation and within units in creation; you don't have any means of constraint for your soldiers. The most serious thing you can do is slap them or yell at them. We had no military police, no courts established; no means of constraint. And these were also needed for those guys who abandoned their positions after realizing they weren't cut out for war, because they expected it to be different. So, they abandoned their positions and left. But as I've said, it's a commander's duty to say whether something is in order or not. There were no directions, no official documents that would regulate that. So, I can't say it was excellent, but if you consider the organization and everything, I think that the job was very well done in the given circumstances. Generally speaking, that goes for that newly established army.

Were all soldiers housed in barracks or...? What was the accommodation like?

Well, these men were in their homes, except when they were active, i.e. when they were in a battle, because at first we were only holding our positions, there was nothing else to do. After we formed professional units, we were housed in a barrack; first in Gabela, and later we moved to a barrack in Čapljina, because a lot of time was needed for that one to be ready; it was huge. The living conditions were not that great, but we were glad we had a place where we could sleep undisturbed. We kept our soldiers ready, so they could be activated within 4-5h, and they were widely spread, location-wise: Ljubuški, Čapljina, Čitluk, Mostar...! I have to admit that at that time there were a lot of men in our unit that came from Croatia. Especially from places around Dubrovnik, Slano, Ston. They were down there with Daida, and when the fighting began in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they came with us and didn't want to go home. Instead, they stayed with us almost until the end of the war.

And the barrack in Grabovina had a medical...How do you call it?

It had a stationary hospital.

Yes, a stationary hospital.. Did it have it?

Yes!

So, it functioned normally?

Yes!

Later as well, not only in 1992?

Well, later we had to build it, because it was destroyed..

But it was built? It existed?

Yes, it was built, it existed. Later it became a teaching facility as well. So, there were doctors there to provide medical help, especially to young army, and also to other members of the Croatian Defence Council, 1st Herzegovinian Brigade (1. Hercegovačka brigada), our unit Ludvig Pavlović.

Let's say you heard that a civilian was in the barrack in Grabovina, what were his conditions there?

Civilians?

Yes!

Well, I don't know of any civilians there.

Were there any civilians at all?

There were no civilians.

There are some records, i.e. depositions, which mention civilians being placed in Grabovina?

At the time the YPA (Yugoslav People's Army - Jugoslavenska narodna armija) was there?

No, later, in 1993!

I don't know, I can't...

All right! If you don't know, don't guess.

My men and I were in charge of the barrack's arrangement. We collected enough garbage and junk to load 150 trucks. We built the first church among all barracks in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. But I have to admit I don't remember that. Maybe there were, but I cannot lie.

All right, only the things you know. So, now we are talking about the liberation of both banks, so to say, that's somewhere in June 1992?!

That's right! The beginning of June. There was the Lipanjske zore operation. I think the liberation started in June or July.

What did you do after that?

After that, Božan and I often communicated with the general. I have to say that a lot of people asked how come Božan was with him, because Božan's family comprised of devoted Croatians. Božan was not a man of many words. He could say what he meant in two or three sentences. I remember him saying that what he saw and knew was enough. He said there was no man in this region that could be compared to the general. And when a man who was one of the most respected men in those days says something like that, you don't need to ask any further. The general often went to Zagreb, where his family was, and came back. It's interesting how he would always come back when conflicts aroused. He always came. And his presence was proved later, at the end of the war, when men looked at him not as their commander, but more as their father who was leading them to battles and cared about them. That was proved on countless occasions when someone would get wounded. I remember when one of our guys got shot. At that time, he was my deputy, and we were near Vakuf, in Uskoplje. The general and I were standing at the observation post watching the battle, when a soldier came and said that my deputy got shot. The general jumped asking how the man was. The soldier said it wasn't serious. And the general said: 'Well, fuck you! Couldn't you immediately say who had been shot and how bad, instead of making me go out of my mind worrying whether it is serious or not.' Another fascinating thing, now that we've mentioned it, were his visits to Zagreb, because I know that at that time they all received medical treatment in Croatia, most of them. Everything possible was done down there, at the site, but rehabilitation, recovery, extensive surgeries were all done in Split or Zagreb. But these were not only Croats! There were Bosniaks, as well. Every time late Božan or I visited those guys, I

remember they were always saying that the general visited them, asked them how they were, and brought them cigarettes. So, during that period even doctors knew he was taking care of his men, helping them through their healing process, recovery, rehabilitation. During his visits, he had a specific approach. He always managed to find something optimistic to talk about. I know that helped a lot. Because, amazingly, most of those men returned after being wounded and continued fighting, even though they had the right to refuse it, based on the fact they were injured in the war. The same happened with Ante Primorac, who later replaced me as a commanding officer. He was almost completely disabled, he could barely walk. But you couldn't get him to leave the war if you held a gun to his head.

You mentioned Vakuf, i.e. Uskoplje. Were you there in January 1993?

No! In January 1993, I was in Central Bosnia together with my unit, because it looked like the conflicts between the Croats and Muslims were about to happen there. So, that's when we went there in order to stop that conflict, but it turned out our forces were not enough to do it. The conflict happened. I remember that period very well, because that's when my brother and my best friend, late Galić who was in my unit, died. That was January 25th, near Busovača, on the way to Busovačke Staje. They moved up towards Staje, but were ambushed by the Muslims. Three of my men died there, and five of them were injured. The second unit under my command was down there in the town, but then the fighting began over there too, in the village of Buselji; I think that's the right name. I joined that group in Buselji, while the other group went to Ravno. We neutralized the ones who resisted us, and there were a lot of captured and wounded, including women and children. They were located on some kind of a stadium, or maybe it was a parking lot or a playground, near the town hall, when I received notice about my men dying. Of course, they told me my brother had been seriously injured, but I knew they couldn't tell me he died. When I got back, they all looked at me like I was some kind of a ghost, not knowing what to do or say. Some of them were afraid of what might happen now that the commander's brother had died. In order to remove the tension, I went there and, since I always carried my cigarettes and ammunition in my knapsack, I took out the cigarettes and offered one to an old woman.

She was a Muslim?

Yes, yes. And she said, I remember it like it was yesterday: 'Oh, my son, we heard our men killed your brother, and here you are giving us cigarettes!'. Then you could see relief on the faces of my men, because they were high-strung. The relief was obvious. The women and children were immediately taken to Travnik, the wounded were sent to a hospital, and the soldiers were taken to a prison. I mean, I cannot say that for sure, because we returned to Vitez after it was done. So, I know that was January 25th, because my brother and my best friend from the unit died.

And there was no retribution?

No! And people talked about me a long time. When I returned down there, when I came Bruno Stojić was the minister, he came to meet me; Ante Jelavić was in charge of logistics. I remember people came to meet me, saying 'Well done! We heard and we are sorry'. I remember meeting the general, it was exactly as Praljak said 'People die in a war!' And that's true, whether it is my brother or someone else. Who's lucky, survives, and who isn't, dies. But it's fascinating it all ended so well, because it could have ended a lot different if we had been different people. Thank God it didn't. I think that's a more important indicator than all the battles we had, in fact, won. We were very tough in a battle. After all, the same way a banker cares about profit, a soldier's goal is to destroy and eliminate the enemy, i.e. to do his job. We had done a good job, and this proves it. Also, a lot of men died, but considering the number of operations,

battles and battlegrounds, it could have been much worse. On the other side, as I've said, we proved we were up to it. The unit was always like that. There were some instances when you needed to remind yourself about the way things have been up to that point; no reason not to continue it like that. We had a lot of men who lost their brothers, a lot of them who were members of HOS (the Croatian Defence Forces – Hrvatske obrambene snage), etc. All that considered, you need to be strong and control your emotions. But I think a good company and a good team can do you well.

Did it ever happen that someone reacted inappropriately? You or that you know of; did general Praljak react if someone behaved differently towards a prisoner? Were you, as a unit, even allowed to keep prisoners?

We were allowed to keep prisoners during fighting, but we didn't have a prison or guards. So, when we captured someone, we would leave them to those in charge of them – the military police or some other unit. We were too valuable in battles, and didn't have enough time to deal with prisoners.

You never held a line?

Well, sometimes we helped out in cases when some soldiers abandoned their position and ran away; we used to step in and stay until everything was settled. But in most cases, we were involved in fighting, mostly attacking. But I have to admit there were some attempts of hitting prisoners, and I believe such things also happened, but I've never witnessed it. Maybe even more than that happened; it was a war, people were dying. As I've said, it was hard to restrain. But considering this issue, I know commanders never gave any motive to soldiers to behave in such manner. The general was setting the best example in the barracks. Why was that so important!? It happened in the beginning. At that time, the models of behavior were being created. That's why it was extremely important. Who would raise a hand at someone? Every soldier was someone's child, and they didn't go to the war because they wanted it, and so on...

THE RECORDING STOPPED

.. could we go to the end of 1992.

We stopped, that is to say we were talking about 1993, about Busovača, in order to show the way the commander determined behavior of the military. However, I would like to go back to 1992 and the part about freeing the left and the right bank, but not near Mostar, but Stolac! Were you a part of that?

So, after the liberation of both banks of the river Neretva, we... Now, the lines were already established somewhere on the way to Stolac, and the Croatian Army was southward, in Stolovi, on the way to Metković and the Adriatic Sea. At that time, Stolac was not a part of our territory. We were also woken up; I think it was 1 am. We started moving towards Stolac; on the left side there was Stari grad, approximately 10 km from Stolac, and we moved through it. We entered the village of Ošanjici, then Barane and then Stolac. In 2 hours we liberated the entire Stolac. However, the resistance from the forces that were on those forts up there was rather strong.

The JNA (Jugoslavenska narodna armija – Yugoslav People's Army) and the Serbs?

The Serbs showed a strong resistance. They covered the exact point of entrance near that Harem, and used machineguns, three barrel shotguns, tanks. They were on Žegulja, from where they used T12 antitank guns and tanks on everything that moved. Therefore, regardless of the fact we occupied that territory and started spreading...first we occupied one fort and then the other, hence stopping the machinegun attacks...they continuously fired mortars and antitank guns at us. So, it was hard to establish lines, because we didn't have enough people to cover the whole territory we surrounded, but then other units started coming that took positions, so the line formed. But all hell broke loose in the town itself. Bombshells were flying all the time, people were dying. One of our member's brother died, he was a member of the Croatian Defence Forces, and they also came at that time. He died of a T12 antitank gun. Those are very fast. As soon as you hear it fired, the explosion happens. That day was known for the only TV interview Božan ever gave, after we occupied Stolac. He was trying to avoid it all the time, and after we were informed of HTV's arrival, the two of us returned from the town on foot, because it wasn't safe to go by car. As we were leaving Stolac, near that Muslim cemetery called Harem, a man in uniform approached us, wearing green beret with lilies on it. He started kissing us, saying 'Božan, well done'. Božan asked him who he was, I'm not really sure about his name; I think it was Mahmut Čehajić. However, he expressed his gratitude for liberating the town. In the town of Stolac there were civilians, but not as many as expected. Most of the citizens left as soon as possible when the fighting began, because the counterattack was expected. However, I don't know where those people went. I only know there was a gathering point in Čapljina since Čapljina had been liberated for quite some time and out of reach, and our goal was to move the battle lines further. That's why we occupied those positions, but as a result Stolac came into the firing range of the gunnery located in Žegulja and Hrgud. However, penetrating the enemy lines meant a great deal, because it enabled us to join forces with the Croatian Army that was in the constant conflict with the Chetniks. So, we joined forces with them and the established defense forces of Mostar. Some of those positions had lasted until the beginning of the operation 'Bura'.

Which operation was the operation 'Bura'?

The operation 'Bura' happened in November 1992, and also represented an attempt to free Podveležje, as well as the entire area between Mostar and Dubravska Plateau, so our unit had the hardest task of climbing 690m, and that's when a big tragedy happened to the unit. Božan Simović died, and the Croats were equally touched by it

as the rest. He was the first legend that got killed in the war. He was a legend while he was alive, not only regarding the way he fought, but also regarding what people thought of him. He was a man unique in his goodness and willingness to help. For a long time we received no pay, so he shared his money with us when he had it. With his death our operation lost its momentum. As a result, some of the goals we had were never reached. We wanted to free the areas completely and oust the enemy towards Hrgud, further away from Podveležje. Our losses were great. The same goes for other units that participated, the Bruno Bušić unit, Kažnjenička, Mostarska... I think some brigades had already been formed, because I know Hercegovačka existed at that time. But as I've said, Bura didn't go as planned, and on top of everything, we lost Božan. The funeral was incredible. After that, the lines were formed, the lines were kept; I can safely say the operations in that area finished. There was nothing else for us to do in that area. So, the lines were kept, new units were structured, brigades were being settled, etc. However, the situation with the Bosniaks started to heat up. Escalations first arose in Novi Travnik, then Rama, and later openly in all areas, Zenica, Kakanj... As I've said, instead of peace as expected, we expected conflicts to start, because the Army had already been in creation, and the Bosniaks from our unit started joining the Army, but carrying our guns, our uniforms, everything.

Were you making them leave, cross over to the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina? In other words, was that HVO's (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane – Croatian Defence Council) initiative?

No, they were instructed by their political leadership to join the Army, thus creating the units of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of course, they started joining their brigades. On our side, in the unit Ludvig Pavlović, there had still been a great number of Bosniaks. When the hardest fighting began, only two were left in my unit. They didn't want to leave us. Some of my very good friends left. That was understood. In case of conflicts, in case that happens, everybody should be with their people.

Did you command them to leave?

No, I did not. Because they were with us the entire time of war. And we were friends. However, men were coming to us, not saying they wanted to join the Army, but asking for a discharge, saying they couldn't fight their own. Of course, we expected them to join the Army, because they had experience, which made them welcomed in the Army. After they left, they were fair fighting against us. It's important to point out that a good part of Zuka's team was on our side. The best of them, from Popara to that fellow; I can't remember his name right now. They were all on our side, under Daidža's command. Even Zuka himself used to come to us. He headed to Sarajevo from our center in Baško field. When I came to Sarajevo, I saw him there and there he stayed. So, especially this unit, 'Kralj Tomislav', not only had a lot of Muslims, but they were constantly armed through general Daidža. Although he went by the name of Mate Šarlija, his real name was Mijat Matlak and he was a Muslim by birth. He was very determined to avoid the conflict, being Bosniak, and he spent a lot of time with the Croats. He really didn't want the conflict. We agreed with him a lot, and we didn't want it either; in 1992 no one really believed that it could come to that. According to some opinions, the Bosniaks were seeking a compensation for everything they lost fighting the Serbs and that led to conflicts. Maybe that wasn't the truth, but that's what some thought.

Did you ever speak to general Praljak about that, do you know how he felt regarding the conflict with the Bosniaks?

Yes, I know! When that conflict started, it was moving us away from our main enemy – the Serbs. And I know the general said that was putting us back, as well as our chances to free ourselves from the aggressor. Because big liberation operations had

already started in Croatia, the war had started again; it was expected we use that, not deal with our internal conflicts. Forces were turning to two sides. Especially Bosniaks and we didn't need that, because we were allies the whole time. And indeed, we were arming them, providing medical treatment for their wounded, and training them. A lot of people, hundreds of them, joined us in Vrgorac, under Daidža's command. Some of them even became commanders of the 10th and other brigades. A lot of people from our unit later became commanders of their own brigades. But I have to say that they didn't stay long in our unit, because of the killing of that guy in Sarajevo, so they had to go back to Sarajevo two days after coming to our unit for training. And as far as the general is concerned, I know he was very pragmatic. He was looking for an optimal solution. I'm also aware that no one benefits from disjointing of forces, and we believed there was no political motive for the conflict at that time. On the other hand, I know the general had been taking care of the wounded, Muslims as well as the Croats. During his visits, he never looked anyone differently.

Ok, so the conflicts had started, let's first call them incidents, somewhere at the beginning of 1993. Where was the Ludvig Pavlović unit in 1993?

Well, the Ludvig Pavlović unit went in Central Bosnia on two occasions. We also went there at the end of 1992...

Under whose orders?

Under orders of the main headquarters of the Croatian Defence Council. We went there with tendency to demonstrate to both sides how all of that was unnecessary, foolish. The first time we returned home, because nothing happened; the conflicts happened earlier in Novi Travnik. We came to Novi Travnik, but there was no conflict there. So, we returned home, and went there again, I think it was the beginning of 1993. I don't know the exact date, but we stayed there a long time, because the conflicts had started all over the place; Bugojno, Busovača, Zenica...they were really strong. At that point, it wasn't possible for us to go back. After our first absence, we came back with SFOR. We passed through the fallen Bugojno, Uskoplje - a part taken by the Bosniaks. And they let us pass through because it was in their interest we leave Central Bosnia, thus reducing the amount of military forces in the area. We didn't have a lot of manpower, around 300 men. But our technique was good, we were well trained, prepared, and we had war experience. After those conflicts, in which my brother died in Busovača, we had stayed there until the time was right to leave. We left accompanied by SFOR. We returned to the base in Čapljina and continued our military training. But then the conflicts started around Mostar, points were set in all streets, in roads, 16-17; everyone was setting points in areas under their control. Everyone had started harassing everyone, and that led to conflicts in Prozor and Mostar. Personally, I wasn't familiar with Mostar, but I was shocked to find that the 4th corps had reached almost Bijeli brijeg with their commanding officers. Even in Vranića the points were set...

Vranića, if you could determine its geographical position, is on the very bank of Neretva or?

No, it is about one kilometer away from Neretva towards this side. In the center of the town there is a building. The building is huge, and it has large basements where the 4th corps had their command center. In our unit, only guys that came from Mostar were familiar with it. The rest of us weren't, we didn't visit it, and we didn't know the city. So, it was astounding. The conflicts also arouse around Stolac, between the HVO and the Army. I remember we went there and intervened in a village near Rotiranjja. We managed to disarm members of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I don't know the name of their battalion, but I think it was a part of the 3rd brigade of the Croatian Defence Council. That battalion wanted to become independent, at the same time

keeping everything that was ours. I remember we came there, took over their position, and disarmed them.

What did you do with them? Turned them over to someone?

We surrendered them. They were taken, I think to Gabela. I cannot say for sure, because we had kept our positions until the Hercegovačka brigade came. That's when we went home, and so on. Rarely we had a day of rest, usually we were somewhere in action; Rama, Prozor, areas around Mostar. As I've said, that's when the conflicts had started in the areas around Mostar, we were there, and afterwards went to Prozor, there was horrible fighting on Bokševica.

So, you were on Bokševica?

Yes! I know that, because five of my men died there and a lot of them were wounded.

That was sometime in the summer of 1993?

Closer to the beginning of summer. Oh, and another thing! Since we have mentioned it! We were in the area of constant conflicts on Bokševica, and covered a very large area with a small amount of manpower. The command center was called Urina Ravan, and 4km further there were the positions of Silj, Kraljevski, Stol, Ključ.

Who held those positions?

Those positions were held by HVO members, and around Konjic was that group, and the positions were kept in order for them to get out of Neretvica.

And who held those positions down there? The Serbs or Muslims?

Our men were down there, surrounded by Muslims. So, those positions had to be kept in order to get them out of there. Most of them managed to get out. I know that general Praljak was there, and I kept complaining about not being able to cover all that area, but we had no one else. At that time, the fighting was strong, and there wasn't enough manpower. So, we were exposed. In case of a serious attack... And the worst attack happened; I think we were hit by an incredible force. We had even planned rescue operations for men down there. And they had started getting out when Bokševac had fallen. When the attack on Bokševac started, we were on a meeting, and we immediately went up there. General Praljak had already been there.

So, he was already on the battle lines?

He was at the command center in Urina Ravan.

So, he was up there?

And 500m above it, on the edge of the forest, a new line was established in order to stop them; otherwise, we would have lost the entire area. That's where I met him. We were trying to figure out a way to keep and reestablish those positions, because men were already demoralized. Those that managed to get out of Konjic held positions on the left side, and my men held positions on the front. Then one part of Brune Bušić unit came to help us regain those positions up there, but we failed. However, we managed to establish new positions in that area. In case the enemy had managed to cut off that area, all other Croatian villages and positions would have been cut off and we would have to get out. It was extremely hard. It's been known to happen that some of our units run away from up there. I know the general was angry as a bear because we had to spread in order to cover a huge area with a small amount of manpower, even leaving some parts unprotected. I remember this one visit, night had already fallen, and we wanted to visit our men and encourage them a bit, when we met this young fellow of only 16 years. He had a carbine, i.e. an M48 rifle, and we found a way to give him an assault rifle, a Kalashnikov, to have it with him since he was already there. We were really sorry to see such a young boy. But there he was, determined to stay. As I've said, it was very hard to establish those positions with a constant lack of manpower. Also, the positions were changing every day. Some of it you lose, some of it you gain.

So, Praljak was with you up there? Did he usually command from a distance or...?

Well, I've said that at the beginning. He wouldn't have had that kind of influence on men and respect if he hadn't been on the frontlines. We even had problems with him. I used to joke, saying 'What will we do without you, general, if you get shot? I will not carry you, and I cannot leave you, which means both of us and men are history.' Usually in warfare, generals or commanders don't do that. But in case you need to set an example and contribute in a way, then you have to be there. In the chain of command there are no rules in case someone disobeys an order. What can you tell them, to go home! You cannot shoot them to death, you cannot lock them up. Later, let's say in 1995, you could send them to court. But otherwise, what can you do!? There were cases, in some groups with commanders lacking authority, when soldiers would say a lot of things to their commanding officers. And commanders say nothing. What can you do? There's nothing you can do, especially when more than one person is against you. So, in order to gain respect, you had to expose yourself. And he was known for it. He had to be stopped from going to the battle. That had a tremendous psychological effect on men. It's important to point out that most of men in my unit had no military service, just guys who jumped into uniforms after finishing high school, with rifles in their hands, ready to defend themselves. They became excellent soldiers, but without any military training, and military training means order, discipline, hard work. And this...it's different when your life is on the line and you can die. It's closer to say they were warriors. Especially in this case, where you have a young army. This wasn't an army with 200 or 100 years behind it, like those other armies. As I've said, when I first came from the JNA, they needed me, but no one trusted me. In that case, you have to either be much better or lucky not to get yourself killed. And prove yourself. If you manage to do that, then you will earn the respect of men. After the fall of Bokševica, we were preparing a counterattack to try to regain those positions; there were already five dead and a lot of wounded soldiers. On the first day, there were 9, on the second 6 or 7, I can't remember. We were planning which way to attack, we attacked but failed. As we were planning, my deputy and planning assistant came, Davor Dodig and Zoran Zubonja, and said to the general they wouldn't participate in the attack if I went, because one commander had already died, and they didn't want the same thing happening to another one.

You became a commanding officer after Božan's...?

After Božan's death. Before the general had a chance to say anything, I said 'What I say goes around here, I'm the commander, and if we are going to a battle, I have to go. You can forget about your requests, I don't care that you refuse to go. Go and get ready with the rest of men, and the general and I will continue planning.' After that, the general said to me 'See, that's something you need to experience.' That kind of experience from subordinates is the same one we often attributed to him. It's like saying 'Don't do it; who will be left to check up on men.' Who's going to tell us jokes? It's been known to happen that we burn ourselves out, and during a briefing he could tell what's going on with us. Raining all the time, mud, battle, wounded and dead men...! And in the evening he would assign tasks to us, which was worse for us than attacking a bunker. We also talked about the way to circumvent the trains, and so on. But the point was to change the atmosphere a bit. That kind of intelligent activity contributed a lot. I have to say I remember what was said about the general, I've read in some Bosnian media describing the HVO generals; how they used 130mm cannons to attack a bunker. And that is fantastic if you have the resources to do it, to mine it, rather than sending a squad to die. Everything that had been written is not applicable in all wars and situations. You have to improvise, which we often did. Some time was

needed to adjust to the war, to fighting the Serbs who dominated many things...and it's fair to admit that when we started fighting the Army, they had the manpower and we had the technique. You need to make a complete turn. So, that's what the general was talking about when he said you need to experience your subordinates coming to you and saying you should keep yourself safe. But when it came to him, that did not apply. In similar situations the two of us behaved the same way. Oh, that's the point. Either you are or you aren't.

And Ludvig Pavlović was a professional unit?

Yes!

These HVO brigades, were they professional units as well?

Well, not in that sense. There were only 4 professional units within the Croatian Defence Council. Most of the guys from Ludvig Pavlović had the same status as in Croatia, in the Croatian Army. In Croatia there was a truce, and even if it wasn't, they would have come home, even if that meant losing their status. But it's nice to know you will receive a pay. Our pay came from Croatia. And to know you would receive a medical treatment and all in case of anything. It's very important to know that. Because no one joined in order to get a pay, but since others were getting it, it was nice you got it too. So, status was important to us, although we didn't have time to spend the money we earned, but a time would come for that too. And the rest of the Croatian Defence Council brigades were organized locally.

Volunteers?

Well, no, that would be a type of mobilization, but they weren't professionals like us. They were called when there was a need for field operations. In the meantime, they were at home. But then again, some battalions were active all the time. I know that every town had a brigade, and cities like Mostar had two; Zenica had one and tried to form another one. There were only 4 professional military formations, and of course there were professional and military police. That was the time when it was well structured. So, that's it, professionalism-wise.

I will not talk about the discipline within Ludvig Pavlović unit, I already know the situation in Ludvig Pavlović, but do you have any knowledge about other brigades, regarding the discipline among military and the way they handled it?

Well, the war had already lasted long, so at the time mobilization started, people had already had enough. It's different with us; we were volunteers, younger men who wanted to be involved, and so on. But here were men with families and jobs. They didn't exactly have the same zeal. That zeal that was present in the beginning slowly started to die down, so some had already started to refuse going on the field and mobilizing. I think at that time they started writing those applications but in any case I know mobilization was a problem, because we had to fill the place for those who refused to go. When the general was in Prozor, up there in Rama, the hardest thing was the relief of a brigade. One group was getting ready to leave, and the question was whether the one replacing it would come. One group had done their job, and wanted to leave. So, we had to go up there and stop them from leaving until the other group came. Then that other group came, but half of men were missing. So, we had a lot of problems in regard to that.

With the manpower?

With the manpower. And as far as sanctions were concerned, I think there were some reports, but no courts were involved, just a 7-day detention assigned by a commander. As I've said, I never had such problems. My men were always there and ready to act. We also had days of leave, but those were often interrupted. It's been known to happen we gather and move in the middle of our leave. And in most cases the reason for that was to cover the areas that were left unprotected due to a lack of manpower. So, the

best thing to do in such cases was to pull back the remaining forces, rather than exposing them to an attack. But generally speaking, the discipline cannot be compared to that of a well structured army.

So, you say the army was not entirely well structured?

No! I was in the JNA and this was something completely different; not in regard of fighting, but this...

THE RECORDING STOPPED

At one point during our interview, you mentioned Prozor, i.e. Rama. Were you in Prozor in 1993, and were you involved in any fighting there in 1993?

I don't even remember how many times I'd been to Prozor during 1993. We were involved in a lot of fighting, defensive activities, as well as attacks. We were, I don't remember the exact time, located in the village of Drinci for two months. I know we set up electric generating units, and brought TV sets; we knew we were gonna stay there some time. But our activities involved the entire Rama. Bokševica is also a part of that territory, then Crni vrh, Ciganska ledina, Radiški kamljen, Seoca, Vedrine and Škarina; we had done a good job there, freed the territory. It's very interesting, because general Praljak was there when those operations were planned. That was the liberation action, which started with Vedrine, Škarina and Seoca. The Convicts' Battalion was in charge of Škarina, and the brigades down there attacked the territory towards Here, Kute, etc., but that happened later. After we finished our work, the war started there. I remember we postponed the attack on Vedrine and Seoca 5 or 6 times, and my unit was in charge of that operation. Later we succeeded in occupying that territory. We had to use the tanks. Because those parts were approached through a wide, open space, meaning we would otherwise be easy targets; this way we were protected by tanks. Mornings were foggy. The general and I met up there at the observation point, where I told him it wasn't possible, and he told me there would be no attack. That wasn't unusual. Our tasks were assigned to us, we would receive dates, and we had to manage the best we could. I think we postponed the operation five or six times, stopping by at my base in Ždrinci to have some eggs for breakfast, and so on. When the time was right, we would attack and get the job done in one day.

What happened to the civilians in Ždrinci? Were they Croats or Muslims?

Croats! We encountered many civilians who remained there. Not too many, but quite enough. They were as any civilians. Those that hadn't run away, lived there. Mostly older people remained, while younger usually left the villages where there was fighting. In most cases, men were mobilized. The women and children would leave, while older people stayed to look after the cattle.

As the Ludvig Pavlović unit, were you ever assigned a task to attack a village? A Muslim village?

Well, honestly, there were some villages inhabited by the Serbs and Bosniaks, which we attacked.

You were attacking villages?

You attack if the battle lines are around a village, within the lines. It happened.

But in cases when there were only civilians in those villages, were you attacking then?

No way, never! I meant to say only if the villages were within the lines, but not civilians, what civilians? We had no business fighting civilians. Never! Never, as far as that is concerned.

Were you ever given an order; you were commanded by the main headquarters?

Yes!

That is to say, someone from the main headquarters! Were you ever given an order to move the civilians, Muslims, from their villages during these operations?

You mean that we move them?

Yes!

No! We were never told to do that, nor did we ever receive a written order to do it. But you have to bear in mind that when the grenades begin to explode and the shooting begins, the civilians leave on their own. No matter if they are Croats, Serbs or Bosniaks. If they are not involved in fighting, they hide in their basements or leave the village; they leave either before or during the fighting, but under heavy fire, they

can only hide somewhere. But as far as that is concerned, no, never! I never received such orders, neither orally, or in writing. I'm stating that.

So, it is safe to say that whenever you executed military operations, no matter if their aim was to defend or attack, they were against other military?

Of course, they were against the enemy. Basically, actions were always the same.

Why, if you could explain, was the fighting around Prozor, i.e. on the territory of Rama, so strong? Was that position of a strategic importance?

Well, at that time, you couldn't make any conclusions, but if you take into consideration the plan that the Bosniak headquarters had about the penetration towards the Adriatic Sea, then it is understandable they had to have that part, had to have it covered. So, cover the side of those forces that would go through the valley of the river of Neretva. If you go through the valley of the river of Neretva, and leave this part uncovered, your line could easily be cut. So, I think that was what happened. Other possibility is that the fighting happened in order to cut our communication with Kreševo and Kiseljak or Central Bosnia. We wanted to help Central Bosnia, but that wasn't possible. We couldn't accomplish such penetration even if we had five times more equipment. And every soldier would have been happy to help Central Bosnia. That territory was badly affected. It was completely occupied; our forces that were inside were greatly outnumbered by the Bosniak forces. So, their main goal was to block us in trying to reach that area up there. Another important goal was to ensure the right side in case they manage to penetrate, in case their forces reach the Adriatic Sea. So, I think it was because they gathered forces from all parts. Also, up there around Prozor and Sarajevo, and from Bugojno and all parts.

Regarding the war between the Muslims and the Croats, what battlefields were you on, besides Prozor?

I was in Uskoplje. That's also related. It's hard to separate it. It's like one battlefield. After the fall of Crni vrh, our forces retreated, so we had to do something. You occupy some part then our forces lose it, so you have to intervene and try to get it back. I was in all areas from Stolac; we were in Central Bosnia until the line was formed. Afterwards, the line including Uskoplje, Prozor, Mostar, Dubravka Plateau, etc. was formed. I think it was on July 13th 1993 that they carried out a very good attack on Dubravka Plateau. They almost took over our command center up there in the operational zone. That's where we intervened. The best thing is we were planning to attack them the next day. They probably had some inside information or something, because they often attacked us a day before we were supposed to attack them. I remember that because that's when we lost three of our men, Bule and that guy from Višići, I can't remember his last name, on July 13th. We were supposed to attack, but we got attacked. They raided us, and I think over twenty people died in that area. They even intercepted an ambulance vehicle with wounded soldiers. So, they carried out a good attack in a short time. It was pure luck that around twenty of us were there; we stayed there because we were planning an attack, while others were in Radimlja. That day and the following two days were bad, so the Bušić unit came and helped in getting back the Gubavica barracks. We stopped them from taking over the command center in the operational zone. They had already mined the road. They had many infiltrated groups. Then they simultaneously attacked our men in Radimlja and this area, but we managed to defend ourselves. We were doing the reconnaissance accompanied by men from the Herzegovinian Brigade; half of them were Bosniaks. The next day they all crossed to the other side.

What about Mostar on May 9th 1993? We are talking about the conflict which started in Mostar and the attack on Vranića.

Yes, yes, I know that, because we were involved in the attack on Vranića.

How come you even came to Mostar?

I think there were some problems in points in Mostar, and I think the conflict was triggered by the killing of a police officer or a civilian or harassment of a priest. That's when it escalated. We were called to the barracks from the main headquarters; in the early morning we came into Mostar by jeeps. We weren't familiar with Mostar, but had two or three guys who were. The rest of us were from Ljubuški, Čapljina... We rarely went to Mostar, so we weren't familiar with it. The conflict had already started, civilians were running from their apartments...! We were sent there not to attack Vranića, but to block, because Vranića was 500m away from the Ministry of Defence of Herzeg-Bosnia.

Had the conflicts already started when you got there, was there any gunfire?

There was gunfire, but it wasn't heavy. There was gunfire, but it was impossible to tell where it came from or who was firing. All in all, the best way to tell was by watching the civilians; since they lived alone, they knew where the lines were. So, they were coming out, and we were set to block the area from Vranića towards the Ministry of Defence and Bijeli brijeg, i.e. up there towards Rudnik. And on the other side towards Rondo, because that was also the road they would take. I remember they almost attacked Rondo. That's when serious fighting began.

You were called that day.

Well, I don't know the exact date. But if that was when it started, then that's when it happened. We came by jeeps, we had a lot of them, and small cars, about eighty of us. When the fighting began, all our army came from Čapljina, crossing Čitluk. A part of them stayed under the Hum Hill until we could see what would happen down there. They came later. So, the fighting started. We used all our forces. At that time, the deputy was Ferdo Herceg, who kept the forces up there. I told him to keep them until other forces would come. So, the fighting was heavy. The worst thing was that we fought in an inhabited area. There were no battle lines, you couldn't tell who your neighbors were, and if you didn't know the place, the position could change in an instant, some building would be lost; it's not like fighting on the hills. On the hills everything is clear, unlike here; an unknown situation. You are fired at from every angle. We came to a point when we didn't know who fired at whom. So, basically, the best thing was to avoid fighting in an inhabited area. I think that we lost an entire battalion of the Croatian Defence Council in Mostar. That many men died, not mentioning the wounded.

Is there anything else you consider important to mention regarding the events in 1993?

No, I think we are done. But as far as the general is concerned, I can express my opinion, as well as say what most men thought of him. Nowadays, most men see him even as their father. It's hard to explain his reactions to someone who doesn't know him. He used to swear, shout, yell, when he was angry. But he is very kind. He is also very brave. Later I realized that, because I'm not from Herzegovina, but the burden he carried, regarding his family, was not something every man could bear. Most people would never go down there if they were in his shoes. But he not only went there, but also earned a great respect. It is incredible, all things considering. I think that says it all. This region, no matter what we think of it, suffered a lot after the World War II; there were a lot of widows, old women, people who didn't remember their fathers. They blamed the whole world, from Hitler, Pavelić to Tito. His father had a function that he had, and now imagine being there and involved in this war with such a background. And to put it all to an end, gain the respect of his men in such a short time, so that he was welcomed with smiles wherever he went. I think that is more

important than these other things. I didn't live there, and I wasn't familiar with the situation, so people explained it to me. That's how I found out.

And when you say he used to shout and yell! Who do you refer to? At whom did he shout and yell?

At soldiers, at anyone who didn't do their job the way they were supposed to. You know about that time when he led a convoy through Čitluk! I wasn't there, but I saw it on TV. He led the convoy. Look, it was hard to do that at that time. The men were angry, there were wounded, killed, and you need to do that. I don't know if food came, or civilians. Who was supposed to lead it!? And then he showed up; I wasn't there, but it was in the newspapers and on TV; general Praljak stopped and said 'Who dares to touch them will first have to deal with me!' And that's how he led them. I think they were civilians, Bosniaks, to be exact. And he led them, while these were all heated up. The question is who else would be able to do that. So, the respect had to be earned. If he's up there, leading the way, who would have the courage to confront him?! If someone would, they would have to deal with all his men. He used to yell at us soldiers. I remember coming to a briefing with one of my men, and he was mad as a bear, because we lost some of our men, some of our lines were penetrated. He otherwise adored that guy, but this time the guy wore a band and was chewing a gum. So, he said to him 'You with the gum, get out!' The guy was surprised and went out. Later he waited for me to finish the briefing. I didn't want to say anything, because I didn't want to start a fight, when later he said 'Where is Dario, that Maić kid? I'm sorry kid, I was angry.' Or that time when he said to Zrinko Tokić 'You don't want that, do you?!'; 'Zrinko, I'm tired of that sad face of yours! I've been looking at it for two years. Smile for once, man! The rain doesn't fall only on you! You are not the only one losing someone, it's happening to all of us. That sad face, it's like you are about to cry.' I also remember when during a briefing he used to ask who wanted to fight with him. Who would want to fight him, he was huge. 'So, why are you fucking with me!?' he said. But that was his attitude, he knew how to adjust to a situation.

All right; and regarding your trip after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina finished? So, what happened with you?

Well, at the end of the war, during the liberation operations; at that time the operation Storm (Oluja) was launched in Croatia, and we were finishing our operations; after that I stayed a little while at the main headquarters of the Army. So, I was in charge of the operational zone Tomislav grad. After that I received a call from our men in politics, because the joint Ministry and Command of the Federation Army was formed, composed of the Army (Armija) and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO). Because of my references and everything, they called me and asked if I was willing to go up there. But they didn't want to burden me with that, because I lost my brother in the war, and they knew that my sister, my late brother's twin, probably lost her kidneys as a consequence of the state of shock she was in, and that she received a kidney dialysis treatments, and we were doing everything in our power to get her a transplant. However, she got hepatitis B, C, which prolonged the recovery. But it was done later, after great efforts. The general helped me with that, because he knew some people and doctors in Zagreb. Of course, I told them I would go to Sarajevo if needed. So, I went there and took over the politics sector involved in planning and operations.

In the Federation Army?

In the Federation Army. Well, you should know there weren't many people in the Ministry at that time. It gained momentum in 1998, 1997. There wasn't enough staff, and the staff in Sarajevo wasn't that good. People weren't thrilled to go to Sarajevo. That's when I took over that sector. And then, thanks to the politics, not me, it was decided that capacities in Sarajevo needed to be filled and our interests needed to be

fought for. I spent a year and a half on that job, and afterwards I became the second in command of the Federation Army's joint command and chief of the Federation Army's main headquarters. General Rasmi Delić was a commander for some time. And afterwards general Latif Dudaković. I was there until March of 2001. At that time, the question about the rights of the Croatian people was raised. I wasn't for it, but we were apolitical and behaved according to strict rules set by SFOR, we weren't allowed to be political. And I didn't want it to be that way, so I left the army and everything. Let the politicians agree on it, not soldiers; or to bring me into a position where I would act as a ballast for either side...So, those that came from the alliance charged me with all sorts of things, but thank God, it was proved they were lying and it wasn't true. I was found not guilty on all charges, and I'm a lot happier now. Not only because I was found not guilty, but because it was proved it was a lie, an attempt to destroy me as a person, an officer, a general. To say the truth, I was young, my career was ahead of me and all. But I'm not sorry, even though it was a traumatic experience to go to all those trials. When you win a case, it can be compared to labor pains of a woman who forgets all about it once the baby comes. The same is with this. When I was found guilty, I forgot all about it. I was glad to see that people around me were satisfied, and that it was proved I was right.

All right! Thank you for the interview.