

DRAŽEN FRIGULA

Zagreb

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The interview has been recorded, the code name of the recording is

dfrigula 1

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dfrigula 2

3,62 MB

Duration 11:21

The interview took place in Zagreb

At the beginning of the recording I will ask you to introduce yourself, your name and surname, date and place of birth.

Dražen Frigula, born on 29th August 1963 in Samobor.

Tell me where do you live?

I live in Zagreb, but my official place of residence is still Bregana in Samobor.

What is your profession?

Machine technician.

Tell me, how did the war start for you?

Well, war began in Croatia. I joined as a volunteer. In Croatia I gathered some experience in 1991, as in my unit to which I belonged in Croatia there were a lot of friends from Herzegovina. Down there they needed help, of course. We were looking at these terrible images of our people suffering and we decided to go to help down there. Place ourselves at disposal. As volunteers, we placed ourselves at disposal at the beginning of May 1992 in Čitluk. People accepted us with open arms. We were a good help to the people, we trained them, formed, and here I met general Praljak. From him we got the first assignment for the reconnaissance of the Čapljina sector. When we did that, Mostar was in encirclement. He asked us to go to Mostar and help with the organization of defence, what we did, and here, in such a way began... We were a group of eight volunteers. And we gave all our strength to defend those people, to preserve Mostar as much as it could be preserved at that moment. And that's how it started... As we had experience. I've been through some of those reconnaissance courses in Zagreb. And we were sharing this knowledge with

the HVO army. We got an order to form a mixed unit with Croats and Muslims and to provide them...

Where**?**

In Mostar, we made a training centre in Tihaljina. As this whole team had some combat experience and has been through reconnaissance training, we passed on this knowledge to them in the school in Tihaljina. We mobilized here, from the records we sought an army that approximately fits to the reconnaissance service, and practically trained and equipped this army, and from that moment on, it was the Reconnaissance Company of the Mostar Military District.

Mixed?

Mixed. Muslims and Croats.

How long did this Reconnaissance Company exist?

It existed until the end of the war, with small personnel changes.

It remained mixed as it was at the beginning?

No, at the beginning of the conflict between Muslims and Croats the Muslims of Mostar in 90% of the cases went to the left bank and practically were shooting at me.

Tell me this, it means we have Mostar as a unit. What is going on?

You were not only in Mostar, you went all around, isn't that so?

I did.

Where did you go?

Well, apart from Mostar we also went to central Bosnia, Vakuf, Gornji Vakuf, the Rama area. Up there I met with the general. By pure chance, there was a mountain on which we conquered some three, four times...

Bokševica?

15 days general and I were up there, trying to preserve our army. At the end, we would conquer it, went on some other mission, those guys would again break through, they would again take Bokševica, so it was taken and lost, taken and lost. Practically, we were trying to keep this Bokševica primarily in order to pull our people out, our civilians. But, we couldn't make it, no way, we didn't succeed. Here was the only road by which we could take the civilians from Fojnica, from Kostajnica.

All right. Except Mostar as a unit we also have central Bosnia, i.e. Vakuf and in particular Bokševica. Do we have any other area in which you were, in which you encountered Praljak or were in some kind of contact with him?

Well no, this was the Mostar Military District and central Bosnia.

All right, let's get back to Mostar in some more detail.

All right.

So, let's repeat: it means in 1992 you were in Čitluk, is that so?

In Čitluk and going down to Mostar.

And you are going down to Mostar. This is in May?

This is the 25th of May.

25th of May. On which assignment did you come? What was the aim of your coming?

Where? To Mostar?

To Mostar.

Just to help the people, that was the only aim.

Who was in this group that went?

From the Reconnaissance Company of the Zagreb Military District thirteen of us, volunteers, of which five returned. Eight of us practically entered Herzegovina, came to Herzegovina and placed ourselves at the disposal of HVO.

Did you have to go, or did you just want to go?

No, no, no, exclusively as volunteers, there was absolutely no order, we didn't even ask permission to go down there. This was exclusively our***, my best friend was here with us in Zagreb, on the Pokupsko battle front. We slept together, we spent six, seven months together. His family was in danger down there and it was necessary to go...

All right. When you came to Herzegovina you already had previous combat

experience?

That's right.

What did Mostar look like to you at that moment, with that experience that you had, and that whole area?

Well...it was one hell of a confusion, disorganization, self-initiatives, groups of men who are trying to do something. A huge amount of effort was necessary to line up all that and to position it as one army, and...

You say confusion? What did concretely, practically this confusion look like on a daily basis?

Every street had its headquarters, every street was a unit for itself. People were arming themselves, it was the beginning of the war, they managed as they could, went to find a rifle, a bomb, a gun. There was this headquarters in Mostar which didn't know what they were supposed to do, it had no knowledge of how to position the defence, simply speaking, there was an enormous confusion.

How did the people know who was shooting at whom?

They knew, because there was a natural border, and that is the river. In means, Muslims, Croats on the right bank, Serbs on the left bank. It was known, the reservists had themselves already divided this part, i.e. the Serbian Army practically took its part as it had planned at the beginning, and...

At that moment the Croats and Muslims are cooperating?

Yes, absolutely. There was no other army but the HVO.

Were the Muslims then in the HVO or were they the Territorial Defence?

Muslims were in principle...

Which symbols did they have on them? Were there any symbols at all?

Muslims that had uniforms were under the HVO. Probably a part of them were under the Territorial Defence or I don't know how, but these men were not seen, practically. There was a continuous curfew, the shells were constantly falling on Mostar, so that you couldn't see the civilians and other people in the streets except the army that was necessary.

But in the army, it means, there were...?

In the army, absolutely. The ones and the others. Moreover, people were coming forward on their own initiative, this was the only option. Even the commander of the defence was a Muslim Jasmin Jaganjac. There was no reason for them not to be in the HVO.

Tell me, was there any crime at that time in that area? When I say crime, I mean all forms, in the broadest sense, from break-ins into apartments, stealing of household machines, TV sets, killings, expulsions. Did you have any such cases?

There must have been...

To which extent? Can we categorize it at least on the level: a little, medium, a lot?

I think these were individual cases. Look, in all wars things happen... individuals prone to crime appear, people who are merely looking how to steal something. Practically, they were the perpetrators of such actions. Probably break-ins into the apartments, robberies and so...

I am thinking of the people who were then in military uniforms.

I have no such knowledge, I have no such information. Look, to get a uniform was the easiest thing to do. You could come to Zagreb and buy a complete military uniform in a shop. As regards my army I can guarantee that no one ever broke into an apartment or expelled anyone.

I am now asking you generally, could you see, perceive...

Yes, yes, yes...Mostar is a pretty large town which by this limited movement, because you cannot move about a lot, there are no cafes, the cafes are closed. You don't know what these individuals are doing.

It means it didn't reach you, that we could speak about a widespread*?**

No, no way. Doesn't come into consideration, especially if you think of it as some kind of strategic activity of expelling, cleansing a certain territory.

All right, we are speaking about what the situation was like in Mostar, i.e. on that area at the time... Did the Military Police function?

The Military Police existed, it functioned but also with very small forces. And I

say, they could solve the problems in the street if there were problems in the street. What happened in buildings, in residential blocks, here practically they could go only to investigate and simply couldn't adequately... One small group in the Military Police that did its best...

******to maintain order?**

They didn't, they didn't, there was still not enough personnel included in that HVO, but later in July it was all organized, you knew all. The organized army already began to march in a military manner and there was evidence who is going where, who is doing what.

Let's try it on one concrete **, there were a lot of civilians there, am I right? Was there electricity?**

Electricity... now you caught me... there was electricity.

Was there tap water?

There was water.

Were the shops open?

The shops...

Could you* food...?**

Yes, yes, we could.

How did you obtain these*?**

Well, we obtained the food, we were eating practically what was in that military part, in tins and what we had in the logistics, and...

******?Did you need clothes and footwear?**

Here we made do individually. The clothes... you always wear the same boots. These boots are a bit rugged, so you wear them for several years, you do not think of changing. The conditions of living were relatively, relatively normal to us who had some money, who were dressed in these uniforms, so you didn't need anything else. But for the civilians it would be very difficult to function in Mostar as the shells were falling 16 hours a day.

That's why I'm asking.

So that, between the alarm sirens, you run into a shop to buy a piece of bread and run back home.

Was there a lot of*?**

People were pretty hungry, even...

Were there any thefts among them, break-ins into the shops. Did you have any information about that?

There were thefts continuously, there were always these groups of criminals, war profiteers, what shall I call them? But (the army was) more worried about the enemy, so you paid lesser attention to such occurrences.

When did you meet Praljak?

I met Praljak in Čitluk, at the beginning of May, when we arrived, in 1992.

In 1992. Under which circumstances did you meet? What did this first meeting look like?

Well, practically it looked pretty professional and military. He received us without big words, without a lot of explanations he accepted us. "We need men who know, who will work". It was ten sentences in all. "We will place you here, tomorrow you will get the assignment" and there was no break. Immediately we went to work, immediately we went to reconnoitre, assessment of the enemy, and so that... around him always, around him... he made everything function well. He knew how to make this hierarchy.

Where was he then?

He was in Čitluk.

In Čitluk where, in the headquarters?

In the headquarters.

Which function did he have than?

I wouldn't know.

All right.

I wouldn't know. I know that he practically received us and spoke to us and here we made arrangements for our work. Our further contacts were related to that request to make these... mixed units. To train and equip as many men as possible, to teach them to preserve their head on their shoulders. So that they can take care of themselves. That they are not like sheep for... to teach every man how to fight, or rather, how to protect himself in that war. This practically**** that he goes on doing this job. You worked...

All right. It means you went on. Your assignment further on was the functioning of this mixed unit, is that so?

That is so.

The training you were carrying out...?

That's right.

It means, this was the job you were doing...?

That's right. And to make ourselves available to the Mostar Military District, where we organized... I, for instance, organized the intelligence service and the reconnaissance unit. Which I led, the one and the other. And worked with them, and...

The activity around this mixed unit – the formation and everything that goes with it – how long did it last in an intensive way?

Practically until the end of 1992. Until the end of 1992, i.e. January 1993. At that time

we practically captured everything, i.e. liberated everything around Mostar. And practically when I saw that there is nothing more for me to do, that I had transferred all my knowledge, I appointed my deputy Ivan Marić who went on leading this unit. I returned home.

Can we go now into a bit more detail on how this unit was formed? What were the duties? What was the composition of manpower? What was your main task? And, first of all who gave you this task?

I got this task... I don't know who from. Believe me I don't know.

To whom were you responsible?

To myself. This task came from the Mostar Municipal Headquarters, i.e. from the Mostar Military District. Jasmin Jaganjac was there. He was the commander. Practically... from whom he got the order in the Military District? I don't know. But I know that I cooperated with him very closely. And practically went to form that unit. It was formed already in July – complete. This was the first army that descended into Mostar, completely equipped, lined up. Walking the military march. This was a sight to behold in Mostar.

July?

Already July. We formed this small intelligence service, a small intelligence office where we collected, where we did reconnaissance with this army towards the enemy and collected evidence. We sent the data to the Main Headquarters of the HVO.

Let's speak a little about the organization of this unit and the problems you had. How did you solve them? What were your basic problems?

Well, the basic problems for this army...practically this was mostly food. There you are. Sad, but true. Mostly, food, as there wasn't a lot of food.

All these men had homes, family.*** all this food was not for the army directly. But to take home. There was no paid army that would receive their salary to feed their families. But I always tried by way of logistics to provide packages for them to take home to feed their families.

Were these men mobilized? Were they in the army? What is this?

These were principally volunteers, mobilized. They are all on the records of the Territorial Defence. But, I spoke to every one of them and I explained what this was all about. Who said that he doesn't want to take part, that he does not want the uniform...you cannot force anyone to go to war.*** We were calling them according to the records. We made a conversation with them. Then we would train them how to survive in order to do such and such jobs, in order to reconnoitre. These people who are here on this list have practically accepted it. And this was mixed, Croats and Muslims. And I can tell you they went along very well in... they jointly went to reconnoitre. There was no separation..."I am a Croat and I go to one side"...No. Everyone worked together. No one was looking at them as if they were something different. There was no difference at all because, I don't know, his name is Smajo or something. These were...soldier like every other. Whether Muslim or Croat, he was a soldier. He has been through a proper training. He became a soldier and behaved in a soldierly manner.

What was roughly the proportion of Croats and Muslims?

There were more Muslims than Croats. More Muslims than Croats, so that...Croats were already pretty much assigned elsewhere. There were

not enough available Croats. Maybe...when we mobilized, i.e. when we spoke to those men, we didn't care whether he was a Croat or a Muslim.

So, we have a unit, a mixed unit in which there are more Muslims than Croats. What are you in that unit? Commander?

I was the commander of this unit.

You are the commander. How many men do you have, approximately?

Of the 120 who were called to the interview to join the unit... the unit numbered 40 to 50 men, at all times.

I will now ask you something which is prominent on my mind. You say there were no tensions. The difference between the Croats and the Muslims was not felt. On the practical level, did the ones and the others have the need for their religious rituals?

Not one. But absolutely, absolutely not a single one.

Not a single one.

Not a single soldier, Croat or Muslim.

It means there was no need?

Absolutely none. If someone had expressed such a desire, I would allow it.

But...without any prejudices. In addition...

Were there any differences in food? These guys will eat this, those will eat that, and so on?

Believe me, not a single word was said about it.

I am asking this because later this became one of the things in which people differed the most, due to what they claimed...

I know that. At that moment... Until January 1993 these men, they might quarrel a bit between themselves. But it was Muslim against Muslim, Croat against Croat. This is normal and human. But there was no separation into groups, sleeping separately, any other needs, no. All were practically... I can be proud of the fact that this was really an orderly army...

Now I am asking you as a commander. You say, there was no need for these religious rituals. If there had been, how would you have regulated that?

I would take it as something normal. If someone performed some rites, I didn't see it. Nor did I get any information that someone was upset due to this.

Good. So tell me, you have a unit of 40 to 50 men, approximately. This unit is going through a training. Is that so?

That is so.

How is the training carried out? Where? Who is doing it?

It was done by instructors who were also friends of mine and whom I asked to

come from Zagreb to Tihaljina. Down there in the school we made a training centre. We were logistically equipped. It means, food, sleeping, hygiene. Everything was at a pretty good level. And practically, people were staying 15 days at a time in that camp and practically learned how to survive in that war. It means, it was combat training. It was... we even have some papers about how... I think it is written here in...here we are, it says...

You may read if. ..

In conversation with soldiers we came to the following information. The soldier Šefik Dedić for *** reasons wishes to leave the HVO unit. There are no problems around that. Training in the centre includes the following topics: topography 15 hours, **** explosive means 4 hours, communication equipment 2 hours, knowing the enemy 3 hours, anti-armour means 3 hours, and so on. It says: "As part of the training a night and day march was done at a length of 30 kilometres, with the performance of tactical tasks. All soldiers must pass the first aid training." Here, this was signed by Darko Margetić, commander of this training centre in Tihaljina. My friend who... and believe me, during these combat activities, I tried to protect every soldier. And I can be proud that we had very few casualties. Some sustained wounds. But all in all, the men learnt to take care of themselves.

Tell me one more thing. People were going through this training. How were they armed? Who armed them?

HVO armed them exactly according to specifications. They got... each one was entrusted with his equipment. Uniform and personal weapon which he was entrusted with and which he took home with him, it was always with him.

Did you...?

All the logistics, everything that was done, including food and even food for their families, and weapons, everything came from the HVO logistics in Grude.

You say this unit actually functioned in such a way until the end of 1992, i.e. January...?

January...spring of 1993.

Spring of 1993. Tell me, did you in that period, that is, until then, until January 1993, as you were commander of this unit, because you had to solve certain problems, contact Praljak? Did you ever come to him to complain about something? Did you ever come and ask him to help you solve something you couldn't solve in any other way?

I'm trying to remember. I think we met...by the end of the summer in Međugorje, but that... I am not the type who will...who will go ask for anything. I managed everything myself. Even less complain about something. The situation is as it is and there was no need. This army now looked like an army. In the command hierarchy, there was the commander of the Mostar Municipal Headquarters and I practically reported everything to him. But this is already as I say, as I say...by the end of the summer. Later on there was already a military hierarchy and it all became more organized. A lot. This Military Police was strengthened and better equipped. I can say that by the end of August it was on an enviable level down there. However much Mostar was in encirclement, very difficult, I can even compare it to Vukovar. I was there, on that area also. The situation was very difficult.

What were the tasks of that unit? Which tasks did that unit perform in that period until the beginning of 1993?

Reconnaissance of enemy positions, gathering of data. Even one... I had... one unit came. It joined us, a unit which later went through training. It was a group of Muslims from Fazlagić Kula which cut its way through the enemy territory, the Chetnik territory.

Where is this Fazlagić Kula?

Fazlagić Kula is near Gacko. This is in...let's say, they were in the centre of eastern Herzegovina. It means, until the first free territory they had to go 100 kilometres.

And they managed?

They managed to slip through.

How many were they?

Sixteen. The sixteen of them, led by...the oldest among them Enver Bašić. A big man. He was in his forties then. And later everyone knew that I had a mixed unit, they sent them to me. I then took statements from them, what they have been through, about the enemy, this and that, about the enemy positions where they slipped through, things I needed for this intelligence

activity of mine. And these people said that in Fazlagić Kula on**** more than a hundred people were captured, women and children which are encircled. The Chetniks are shelling them every day, they are trying to literally wipe them out. And they asked me if I would

accept them with me, armed them. Then I explained that they had to go through training first, this and that... And I also again called the instructors and the 16 of them were trained in Tihaljina. They were very well prepared in July, we armed them, trained them and sent them to take their women, children, parents and the wounded out. That they pull them out from***, to try. Which they normally accepted. Their families were there. We gave them maximum help, logistically. It took them 12 days, they passed the centre of Gacko. They pulled out 110 people, of those three seriously wounded on stretchers over the whole of Zelen Gora. They penetrated twice the Chetnik line, they passed without firing a single bullet all the way to Zenica to the hospital, pulled out the seriously wounded and the complete families. These men really had heart. A very compact team they were. They had even promised that they will carry out a diversion which... So I told them "no", that they have to do it quietly, to pull these people out. And they pulled them out. People were thanking us via Radio Mostar.

Did they every write to you, did they...?

Well no, they didn't write. Firstly because I didn't, I don't know how they would reach me, I wasn't advertising myself, nor did I have any interest in gaining any favours on account of that, this was purely normal and human.

These were human contacts...did they express their thanks...?

Yes they did, they thanked me, they were coming to Mostar personally...

especially these three seriously wounded, all three of them came to Mostar. They came to say their thanks.

So you trained them and gave them logistical support...?

Completely, they were members of the unit, full fledged, they entered the unit, practically they were on the list of manpower, it was the beginning of August. I think that around 12th August I sent them, transferred them to Igman. From Igman they set out on foot over the whole of Zelen Gora all the way down to Gacko and came back the same way. They came to Mostar with a successfully completed task. And they were practically members of the unit until the end, until the beginning of 1993.

***** I presume what is the answer. Do you keep contact with those men? Do you maintain contact? Do you know where they are now? Is it possible to reach them?**

I don't know. I don't have contact with anybody. I...when it started to boil between Armija BIH and HVO, these 16 men didn't want to go to Armija BIH, although we were offering them ranks and tried in all sorts of ways, although it didn't make sense for them to go to Armija BIH when they were members of the HVO. People were conscious of what we gave them, how we helped them to save their***. Finally, we placed all those families of theirs in Orebić, all around in these centres...

Just a moment, I didn't quite catch you! It means they came to you?

Yes.

You trained them, gave logistical support. They came back, having taken all their families with them, salvaged all they needed and came back to you?

Again into the unit and they continued to reconnoitre, to fight with me shoulder to shoulder and this is that*** these are they.

It means, after that they are returning, returning again...?

Yes, yes.

And stay with you for how long?

They stay with us practically, until the beginning, until the spring of 1993.

And then?

Then I had gone... the war against the Serbs was practically over in Herzegovina, I came home to take a bit of rest from it all. Then they called me at the beginning, in the spring of 1993, after about a month and a half, that something is boiling and would I come to Mostar, that they need me. I came down there, this unit was all gathered...

So you are returning – when?

I am returning... which month was it? I think it was April, March, April...

Which year?

1993.

It means until then there are no, you say you do not notice, there are no tensions...?

Absolutely no tensions! When I was leaving, Armija BIH had been structured in Mostar, started to march through Mostar, show off some power of theirs, irritate the people... But this army (of mine) was practically vaccinated against this.

You are speaking about your unit?

I am speaking about my unit. It was simply vaccinated against this. We were sitting down, they were passing up and down marching. People love to march, so let them. It is good that an army is being formed, to lift some of the burden off your shoulders, some new people, the more of us the better...

******* marching at that time some conflicts occur, the conflicts between Croats and Muslims already begin.**

Well, this started, these conflicts practically, these conflicts, I think the first ones started in central Bosnia, these conflicts, these sparks in Vakuf...they... It was a joint command, as far as I am informed they made their own headquarters in the neighbouring building and immediately started to dig a trench toward our command.

Is this reflected on*...?**

On my unit absolutely no. Even the Croats, here are all these friends of mine whom I met down there, a lot of friends in Mostar, to all of them it was inconceivable that the next day that will be the force that will point the guns at us. At the end of the line, we are arming them, giving them all the logistics, we give them food. We keep their families down at the Adriatic, in these camps. It is simply inconceivable that a man who is sitting down with you, drinks coffee, only because he has put the symbols of Armija BIH on him, that he could turn the weapons on... When I came down there there were already the beginnings of something like that Armija, a bit stronger, and I came...I came to the headquarters where I was met by my people from Gacko, and the new commander of this unit, my friend Ivan Marić tells me something is in preparation, they don't know what and says this... But slowly the

people are leaving the unit, they ask...

Who did he think of?

... Both Croats and Muslims, they started leaving the unit. As if...the war is over, so***. When this unpleasant event, i.e. this conflict in Mostar between... this started without any orders, without anything, like the powers of nature which... Simply the word went around that the next day Armija BIH will attack us, and people just gathered, put on the uniforms again and tried to defend themselves. It was a terrible chaos. This unit of mine functioned all the time. It was still doing reconnaissance, but it was halved as far as manpower is concerned. I again joined this unit, went again to help my people and in the midst of these military activities, these clashes in Mostar, I would meet my soldiers in the uniforms of Armija BIH and they were surrendering to me or I don't know what...

Surrender to whom?

They surrendered to us, directly to me. Here, what to say? I was surprised. They told me I shouldn't be surprised because these are after all the Muslims from Mostar. They are different then the rest... but it was inconceivable that someone to whom you gave all and led him and protected him throughout the war and fed him throughout the war, that he will point the gun at you and fire at you. For which motive, religious, territorial, what else... To this very day it is not clear to me why.

***** There must have been some process of division in the unit?**

Absolutely not. It came, a calm came about where there were no fights. The Serbs were chased away from Mostar. Practically liberated... where the majority of these people had houses on the left bank. Practically they returned to their

homes. There came to a point of saturation, let's call it a dead period where nothing is going on. And this army that does the reconnaissance looks all the time at the same point, there is nothing, the Serbs are not shifting position, simply nothing... And here the people, the army starts to dissipate. I realized that the army began to dissipate due to this inactivity, because practically *** solved. But at the end it turned out that a part of them was dissipating in order to go to Armija BIH. Even one of my assistants Semir Kljako, who was one of the better fighters.

Semir...?

Semir Kljako. Let's say that he was my assistant. He commanded one platoon. He was a platoon commander. He went to the left bank and was all the time in Armija BIH. He was shooting at me. He is alive and lives in Mostar to this very day.

When can we say that this division becomes palpable, that the mixed unit practically doesn't function any more?

Look, this mixed unit could have functioned further with these men who remained in the unit, especially these from Gacko and this one, they were ready for our sake to carry the uniforms for life. But when this conflict started I sent these men to go to their families, into exile. Because I didn't want them to have unpleasant scenes in Mostar. You have all kinds of people. He walks on the street, and someone is calling him names. Nobody needs that, his dignity must be respected. Then I said: "Look guys, this is now not your war. Go to your families and after the war we will again..."

All right, but when does the mixed nature of the unit cease to exist?

The mixed nature of the unit ceases to exist two, three months after the conflict. Let's say two months after the conflict, until the last day practically, the last day...

When is that approximately?

Just a moment, I will try to remember. So, around 30 days since the beginning of the conflict.

Which is roughly when?

Let me just remember when the conflict started, which month...

All right. It means, that group from Fazlagić Kula, you are letting it go, is that so? And these others, they are leaving?

They are leaving.

Yes. Are they taking their weapons with them? Everything?

Absolutely, all their weapons they... It means...

*****of what, how did they leave? What did they take with them when they left?**

Complete personal arms, i.e. arms they got from the HVO and no one asked a question about these arms, nothing.

No one asked for...?

No one asked because they were still on my list. They simply like didn't come to the unit any more. As if they were at home, refurbishing their houses, doing work. On the basis of that they got a leave to do this or that... They did not formally submit a request for demobilization or something, to disband the army, but simply as if they have other things to do, they must put in order something on the left bank, they have to work on their houses that the Chetniks set on fire and such things. So that... There is a part of people which, I wasn't there these two, three months...when I came back I went to some other positions, to form some new armies. So that this unit was practically down to a dozen men who did the reconnaissance and it stayed like that until the end of the war.

And these who supposedly went to refurbish their houses and the like, by the time they began...?

Most of them... There were those who stayed on our side who simply took off the uniform, and nobody touched them. Simply, no one asked them to fight now.

Were there any cases where the Muslims who were with you until yesterday, were now against you?

Yes.

So there was even that?

Yes.

Precisely those who have been through...?

Yes, yes, absolutely. From the first ones... It means from those first men whom

I met, for whom I thought that it was impossible for them to turn against me. There was quite a number of them.

All right, * will end. I think we have the Mostar story wrapped up. Is there anything else of essence related to Mostar, or the mixed unit that you would like to mention?**

Well, nothing special.

Then we can move over to central Bosnia?

We can.

It means central Bosnia... Bokševica, isn't that so? What were you doing at Bokševica? Let us go from the beginning. When did Bokševica...?

Bokševica is ...

The most difficult question?

Autumn 1993, I think, I am not so good with dates.

All right.

I am not so good with dates, and besides, ten years have passed since.

All right. So the dates are roughly...

I think it was early autumn.

**But we can check it out. The dates must be somewhere on paper, is that right?
But let's take it this way: what were you doing on Bokševica and did you meet
Praljak there?**

Yes. On Bokševica we... I was then the chief of headquarters of the Ante Bruno Bušić regiment, i.e. the deputy commander. And on Bokševica the regiment took this Bokševica two, three times. There were fights there constantly. I came there for the first time on its third allocation on Bokševica, i.e. when the Muslims again, the Armija BiH took Bokševica again. Our aim was to make the corridor for the pulling out of civilians. Up there with the army we primarily kept the positions rather than fought. General Praljak came up there to visit us. He was full of élan and he tells me: "Frigula, show me where the army is!" I take out the map and show him our lines on the map. But he says: "No, no, we will make a tour of the lines." Then we went from one position to another, from trench to trench. He had something to say to everyone. "Dig this deeper, you cannot protect yourself like this, make this for yourself, put two, three stones, not like this, are you all right, what's bothering you, are you tired...?" A thousand questions. This tour lasted around two hours, though we could have done it in fifteen minutes. We were returning from the other side, and he tells me: "Where else are you insured?" I tell him: "Up there on the rock there is a machine gun nest covering the entire plateau." He looks at me and says: "I see that you are tired, I am going up there myself." I tell him: "Don't go up there, your ankle is injured." "No, no, I am going up there." And he was gone, for a long time, he is not appearing. I went up there and he was digging a trench for a soldier! And so, we came back...

Just a moment, why is he digging a trench for a soldier, why, how...?

Eh yes! To show him how this should be done, probably he was angry at seeing this guy so unprotected, so he went to make a better position for him, to show him.

And what is the soldier doing at that time?

He sits and watches.

How about Praljak? Was he angry?

He wasn't angry, he never shouted at the army. He always gave morale to the army. He was shouting at commanders, at someone who was creating chaos, on such guys he would shout. On the ordinary soldiers, never, towards the ordinary soldiers he was actually tender, he tried to put it into their heads that they must protect themselves, to complete their task and stay alive. So here we were a couple of days together, discussing, when Armija BiH attacked. A terrible chaos ensued, fighting breast to breast. The armies were mixed. The dead, the wounded. Practically he refused to relinquish the position. General Praljak did not want to leave the position to go for safety, but he remained. We stayed up there on that Bokševica, there was a small one-room house. They even fired at us.

Tell me a little bit about the moment when they fired at you.

Well, he and I were sitting inside and the battle was going on. We tried to defend ourselves, to coordinate. Practically, this was the first time in my life that I wasn't in front of my army, but had to sit in that small house with him. I was very hard for me. Then all of a sudden, firing started on the door, on the entrance. Even the general thought they were in front of the door, that we are under attack, and the windows were small, no way to escape. And here he took the rifle and returned fire. He started fighting, and as I am smaller, I could drag

myself out and came around the house, and when I saw the situation that they are a bit further, that they are not so close, we managed to repel that attack.

How many of you managed to repel that attack?

Just the two of us.

You were alone, just the two of you?

Just the two of us. But in principle they were not after us, they just fired on, on... From a rock they fired on us with machine guns.

How far were they?

Let's say some 40 metres. This whole action took place on 400, 500 square metres, the battle, and here is this small forest and...

***** you were inside that house, on purpose*** or...?**

That was the only...

Was this accidental?

Did they know that we were inside, they knew someone was inside, but that is the only house.

But they didn't know who?

The army was sleeping down behind us. It means, we were in front of the army towards the battle line. A bad position for commanding, a bit strange position, but

we weren't sleeping, we were talking and so. And that night all hell went loose and our men were killed and I lost a dear friend of mine. And another one was seriously wounded. And here we captured in these first fights a young man, a child. The boy of 17. Member of the Armija BIH. I think his family name was Kovačević. And the army got hold of him. I managed to somehow pull him out from the army and talk to him. I had to take him out of there. There were already the dead, the wounded. The army was crazy. There was not only our company up there. There were members of HOS and from three, four sides... three, four armies came up there in the night. Complete chaos. And everything was going on behind our backs. Because we were in front towards front line. Now we were looking at the front line. We were looking whether it functions. I managed to put that boy in a car and take him to Mostar. I turned him over to the Military Police, and in jail. Finally, the boy ended up in Čapljina. He worked in the kitchen. We were guarding him. Because they had, Armija BIH had in Jablanica one of our soldiers seized. So we wanted to exchange him. But this young boy didn't want to go into exchange. It was fine for him in that kitchen that he didn't want. What exchange, no way. And these guys in Jablanica did not feel like exchanging prisoners either. So the boy stayed. I think to this day he is working in the kitchen in the barracks in Čapljina.

Was Praljak somewhere near when the fuss over that boy took place?

Well, he was with me inside.

How did Praljak behave, for instance in relation to...?

No, no, no, excuse me. It was before Praljak came.

Aha, so that boy was captured before Praljak came?

Yes. He came afterwards...This was the first activity where we advanced well. When he came Armija renewed its attack. This was a religious attack. There went a Muslim priest with a megaphone. *** we are waiting for them. To our estimate, we were attacked by some 150 people. They came, we heard the murmur, rustling. They come upon us in the forest. He was shouting. We only heard from the megaphone "Allahu egber" and we heard one line answering: "Allahu egber". We heard the megaphone****. We knew that they will...that there will be all sorts of things. But this is chilling. We were constantly..., this was really as if fanatics were going after you. Such an experience. And then, when the night came, chaos. The dead, seriously wounded, our tank hit a mine, those who were able were pulling out the tanks. Briefly speaking, chaos. There were...

Were there any prisoners taken?

No, no. There were no prisoners. There was not even...we lost that battle. We lost it. I watched, we lost the battle as we had a lot of dead and wounded. But, we didn't lose the positions. But, let's say, this was the last attempt at defence in order to advance, to take that plateau, the Bokševica Mountain. We stood at the beginning and could not advance any more towards the other side.

During that battle, was Praljak present there?

He was present, yes.

**How did Praljak...you were with him then. How did he behave then?
What was he doing in...this was the night? What was it?**

Night. He strictly tried to coordinate the defence constantly with

some...in some radio contact with our men in the first line, and just like a real commander he tries to...

To what extent was it possible, regarding, as you say, there was a lot of soldiers, there was** probably the people were frightened?**

Absolutely.

Leaving aside the fact that Praljak was a commander, how much could he have commanded in that situation?

Well, look. Praljak wasn't actually even in the function of commander. He was not here in the function of commander. He went up there to help personally, as much as he can, to help the soldiers to take that Bokševica...

So, formally, he was not a commander?

Formally he most certainly did not come up there as commander.

But it means he still managed to assert himself as...?

Yes, but this is normal. Because we knew him it was normal that we left the command post to him, because, you see: the man has been through the whole war. He is a clever man. He will do some things better than us who are merely improvising. So that up there he did not have absolutely... in principle he was not the commander of the army, but the commander of the attack. He practically...that is, of defence. He tried to preserve that defence to prevent the Armija BiH from penetrating the lines and creating a general chaos. So that, I think he handled himself up there very professionally, to the greatest possible degree, as regards all that. As regards the battle.

How great was at that moment Praljak's influence on people? I.e., how much do the soldiers, those that were directly up there, directly on the positions, how much...?

Well, in principle they had no contact with Praljak.

All right. But the very information that he is here, did it have some influence?

Of course it did! It meant a great deal to the army that one general came to visit them, to help. It was then that I saw...I saw just in Mostar when...to come back to Mostar, when we came fully equipped in uniforms, people were looking at us with wide open eyes. They think: here are the saviours. People do not take much to lift their spirits, to become strong, and he did an enormous thing to this army when he came up there. Simply, it meant a lot to the army. When they saw him.

What** he actually didn't come as a formal commander?**

He came there to help. He asserted himself in a way as commander by his experience, his charisma, that something that he has in him.

What was the essential thing which he appealed to in order to achieve**? How did he achieve that?**

He didn't have to. He is an appearance by himself. Gladly seen by the soldiers. The soldiers know that he was always just. That it is not without reason that he came up there. That he really cares for every soldier. This means a lot to an ordinary soldier. Therefore he doesn't need to give a lot of advice...much less to shout at him. No. It suffices that they saw that he is nearby. They had, I think, a double strength. And that night when (the Muslims) attacked, fired on our little house, i.e. on our

command post... Down there we had one working unit. A lot of army was assembled down there on the principle that they came of their own accord into that camp, which is... Some were ready to go fight in the forest. This is it, the night fell. We couldn't keep the control of the position any more. Practically Praljak ordered retreat to reserve positions because in the forest everything was mixed up. Our people are falling down. We went towards that tank to salvage the tank, to pull it out. The mechanics unit came to repair that tank, we were securing it...All that time, it is very difficult to describe, all that time, I don't know, 40 – 50 people are in the forest. They are fighting, ensuring that...practically we are losing, losing this Bokševica. The dead and the wounded are being carried into the camp. The army is crazy. In the camp and in the base. One terrible mess. The ambulance comes and goes, comes and goes.

All right, and what do you attempt to do then? What is being attempted?

Nothing, the attempt was...

The army tried to retreat to the reserve positions?

(they both speak at the same time)

To organize, protect all this army. Practically, give them over, leave the Bokševica with as few...

But what was the aim of keeping Bokševica. I.e. why do you find yourselves on the Bokševica?

Bokševica was supposed to...this Bokševica was supposed to be taken and to keep that plateau. Because practically, you then hold the communication, this main road going toward central Bosnia up there, more to the north. Practically, with this plateau we can pull out our people who are in Fojnica, Kostajnica, which

are...**How many of our people are now there? Is there a...?**

Civilians or?

Our people that have to be pulled out?

In thousands. This is the entire town of Fojnica. Practically it was necessary because they were encircled. The war was in one terrible momentum. We survived the slaughter in Doljani and that other slaughter of theirs in Grabovica. So that...it was necessary...we tried to pull all our people out. Even if it takes to vacate the entire town. It was necessary...

It means, that's why it was necessary**?**

Absolutely.

And did you succeed in that?

No, unfortunately not. Unfortunately not. People were already fed up with war. It was difficult to persuade a brigade to be on the mountain in order to hold...

Wasn't there a group that went there?

Yes, but it was all too little. Let's say, with them...there was... in Armija BIH there was this fanaticism of theirs. Because, they were going into attacks without any regard for their losses. Our people became gradually frightened of that. Because those groups that came to assist us up there numbered 10, 20, 30 men. Parts of some units. They come up there to help... It was very difficult to form any brigade and that the whole brigade goes to hold a position in central Bosnia.

All right, but was a certain number of people pulled out?

We didn't succeed in pulling any out, from there.

Continuation of the recording. Mr. Frigula. We are talking about Bokševica. Is that so?

That is so. On that Bokševica practically, in those fifteen days that we spent there...that night of fighting breast to breast, the dead, the wounded, the central event of it all. On that plateau, on that base of ours assistance began to come. But, those were groups of 10, 20, 15 people. No one introduced himself. He just came up with a car, made a mess...

On their own initiative?

On their own initiative. They were just coming. No one bothered to introduce himself. Neither did we know whose army it is, which army. Simply...
(they both talk at the same time)

****** to control them?**

It was impossible to control it. Especially as it happened behind our backs. And we were oriented towards the battle line. We tried not to lose the position. Because, here they would cut us through...

It means, just a moment, if I get it right: on one hand in the military sense you need every rifle, every man, every help because you are losing the positions. On the other hand, you don't know who these people are who are coming to you.

That's exactly so.

And you have no possibility of checking out...?

That's right. The first ones who came, we included them in this. But, you cannot include a large number of men on a small area. Practically, by the law of numbers you have a greater probability of someone getting hurt. But, this battle was going on the whole day and a greater part of the night. It was necessary to refresh the people, replace them. If...some people have died. These holes had to be filled. And here we sent the men that we had, i.e. for which we knew that they were up there. But, there were also groups of HOS, some local population dressed in uniforms who went into the forest by themselves, without reporting to us, because we would allocate them where help was needed. But no. He knows that his brother is in another unit. He knows that he is up there. He is going to help his brother, and things like that. And practically, there appears a terrible disorder when they started to pull out our wounded, dead and take them down in the camp. Five or six ambulances were waiting there. They were coming and going. We were filling the holes that we could fill. They were firing at us, at the camp. Around two hundred men gathered down there which in principle we didn't know how to use. We couldn't use them. We were trying...we went amongst them. We were trying to allocate them to see what we have. But, no one was talking to anybody. Everyone was shouting, screaming.

What is the situation with regard to losses? With regard to fear? With regard to everything that actually happened? To what an extent is this an army, and to what extent is this merely a group of men?

Look, there was not a lot of fear. There was not so much fear as there was fury, anger, impotence. Impotence, which... He has in himself this inner fear that doesn't let him go forward. And practically, this man will stay in the rear. He will shout. He will create terrible disorder. But he will not go and fight. Because this

fear is enough for him, and it is protecting him from going into the battle. To survive. And practically, such men were creating most of the problems in combat activities. These rear fighters, as we called them.

How did Praljak function in all this? Did Praljak*?**

Praljak was functioning superbly. He was trying, exerting himself. But in these moments there is simply, no...there was no military... He can go to every man personally and say: "Calm down, boy, wait half an hour, than you will go to such and such a position." No. Simply, there were no commanders to which he could transmit his orders to move the army here, or there. You cannot do this backwards, to deal with someone who is behind your back, while practically you are at the battle line. Because Praljak, we held...practically, this little house held the right flank of the plateau. And practically he and I held the battle line.

Explain to me, please, if you can, how do you command in such a situation to such a group of men? That is, if you don't have the chain of command, if you don't have a structured group from which you can expect certain things or give them assignments. If it is as you say that Praljak goes from man to man and says: "You sit and calm down", "you wait, then go there" how then do you command? How do you make this group do something?

In some normal circumstances, in some normal military actions this is easy. There is the commander of the group, commander of the brigade, company, whatever. You have someone to whom you can give your orders, who will do everything according to your words. And obey. But here, when the men are just pouring in, and you don't know who is their commander, you tell them one thing and their de facto commander who is coming out of the forest is telling them another, he listens to his commander. He goes where that one sent him. Or if this (commander) is not

showing up, this guy will not move a finger. Nothing. Practically, it is impossible to rule over such a group of people. Absolutely impossible.

Good, did Praljak try something even in these impossible circumstances?

He did. He is not a man who will sit down and wait to see how the situation will develop. At the end he brought order into it all.

Thanks to what?

Just power, his authority, his patriotism. He had some inner force...

Let's take it this way. Is that the power of the rank?

No.

Is this the power of the paper?

No, not in the least.

The power of orders?

Not in the least. This is will power. This is simply the man who, when you saw him in front of you, when he said three sentences, you had to continue listening to him. He is not the kind of man who would assert himself by saying: "I am a general." No. He would never say that. He only said: "I am Praljak. I'm glad that we met."

It means, what he managed to achieve then, whatever he achieved...

Absolutely, only his will power. Only his patriotism. I don't know what he is thinking, how much he succeeded in that war. But I think he is satisfied just as I am. We gave our maximum. That...you are sorry if you didn't do something, if you could have done more. At that moment you didn't know that you could have done more. But, I sleep peacefully...

Do you sometimes have the feeling that more was done than realistically could have been done?

Well, I have a feeling that a lot of times, we did things beyond human capabilities. Odd.. I don't know, it's difficult to define this state of war and only that... Because, it is different if you are a paid professional soldier and you have a complete hierarchy, 100 years, 200 years it is known what everyone is doing, thinking. Everything is known. Everything is written down. And here it was pure heart and ideals. And I don't think that anything else moved that man but patriotism and ideals. He is not the kind of man who will sit on the sidelines. He is the kind of man who will try to do his best. He will give his maximum effort for things to turn out for the best.

Tell me just this for the end. You were not on the Bokševica until the end, is that so?

No, no. In the morning... as we had a pretty large number of killed, wounded, big losses, and we were up there for 15 days without washing, without cleaning, without hygiene, practically without food, without... in terrible conditions, in the morning we withdraw this part of our army that was left, and... this platoon, company, regiment Bruno Bušić was withdrawing. We were going to other assignments.

Did finally Bokševica fulfil its aim at least in one sense, and that is the pulling out of civilians?

Yes, yes. Not fully, if we had managed to keep this Bokševica in full. All this time we were on the edge of this Bokševica, towards our side, our edge of the plateau. If we had managed to keep the entire plateau of Bokševica, we would do much more. Much more people could have been pulled out. And maybe the war would have ended up there. Combat activities. But, it didn't happen...

All right. In any case, at least in one part the goal was reached. A part of the civilians was pulled out. But then you were not any more...

I was not any more. I heard that they were pulled out. But, I didn't get to know anyone...

Thank you very much.

Zagreb, October 2005