

MATE ODAK

Ljubuški

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Here we are, we turned the dictaphone on. I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself at the beginning, to tell me your name and surname, date and place of birth, your profession and current residence.

My name is Mate Odak, I was born on February 6, 1961 in Crveni Grm, with a residence in Crveni Grm. I live in Crveni Grm, municipality of Ljubuški, my profession – traffic engineer. That would be it. I am a father of four children, if that is necessary for the record.

Yu are a father of little children? Big children?

Well both big and little. I have two children, two children of full age and two small ones. One goes to a sixth and the other to a third grade.

You enjoy yourself then, you must lead a full life.

Well yes, for now.

Tell me, Mr. Mate, do you remember the years of war? Do you remember how the war started in the region? When did you join? What did you do? At the beginning how it all went for your?

Well you see, at the very beginning I was a president of the local community in Crveni Grm. At that time, since the very attack against Male Bare in Ploče, the local community tried to establish, or let us say, organise some kind of village

guards because the general atmosphere was full of fear and insecurity. We saw how Croatia was attacked and believed that they would attack us, although we didn't know when exactly. My organisational activities thus begun somewhere in 1991 after a few people from the village showed self-initiative and decided to organise some kind of defence at the municipal level. We established a local community platoon and organised some sort of military training, running with sticks and exercising.

You were training and running with sticks? Why? Didn't you have any rifles, or?

No, we didn't have any. Where from?

Sticks were used as rifles?

That's right. Sticks were used as rifles. We ran through the woods and fields in Crveni Grm. There were some boys who had already passed military training in the former army. I did not have any military training because I was a radio-telegraphist, a signalman. Well, some thirty men gathered around and formed some kind of platoon. We had a will and spirit to defend ourselves. We did not have any arms. We trained a bit in order to resemble some kind of military company, to be able to march and nothing else. After that I was summoned by the then Secretariat for National Defence, better to say, I was mobilised, in order to establish communications and other things. When the war started I worked there. Later on I was summoned to join the brigade, as a radio-telegraphist. However at the time it was not actually a brigade but municipal headquarters. But it was all half-half, there were people both in uniform, and civilian clothing. Mostly people self-initiatively attempted to organise themselves. In the beginning Čapljina happened. I did not go to Čapljina then. One our platoons left for Čapljina. A disaster and chaos ruled in Čapljina, there was nobody, not a single man to be seen. After Čapljina, I do not know how many people stayed there, I

think that the platoon stayed there for ten days without any kind of organisation. I know that General Praljak was there at the time but at the time did not have a rank of general. He walked around the town trying to make the citizens of Čapljina defend themselves, trying to organise some kind of defence and talk the people into staying. However, all that was extremely chaotic. Later on, my path ...

That means, I only wish to ask you, you did not take part in liberation of the military barrack in Čapljina?

No, I was not there.

O.k.

What followed later was my first terrain work which happened in Krivodol. I think it happened in June 1992. I was in charge of communications organisation, as some kind of communication officer, although at the time I was not even an officer, I was merely the first one who wanted to go to the frontline voluntarily, to say so. A day or two days later the Croatian forces crossed the river Neretva and attacked. In that way the defence line was formed and stabilized to some extent. I stayed in Gubavica later on.

Aha, Gubavica?

Gubavica, yes.

And the river Neretva, during the crossing of the Neretva river, did you have any duties? Did you take a part in that?

No, I only worked on the communications organisation until the beginning of

the operation. We stayed in Gubavica later on and held the line there in direction of Serb forces together with the Muslims from Gubavica and that part of the village. The Muslims had a unit and held the line together with us. We provided them with arms to some extent.

What was the name of that unit?

The unit consisted of local residents mostly. I met a commander, but I cannot remember his name now. Those were mostly the residents from Bivolje Brdo, Gubavica, Rotimlja, that part of the region. The residents of those villages gathered and joined forces as same as we did before, only for a year, they received some uniforms, and some uniforms they had on their own.

That unit exclusively consisted of Muslim members?

Exclusively of Muslims, but they were officially under our command although they had their own command headquarters at the former military barracks in Gubavica. We were there together on the frontline but principally they were deployed under our command on the frontline in direction towards Serbs.

Well, we are talking about Gubavica, which month was that?

Well, that was June, 1992.

June, 1992.

Yes. At that time they did not have the established army, their army was not

formed as yet.

You have to tell me who – who they?

A part of the unit consisted of local Muslim residents who were organised to some extent but not entirely. They were deployed together with us, under our command, under the command of the then Headquarters. I think that was already a brigade. We provided them with arms to some extent. We gave them 82 mm Rocket Launchers and they had their own crew who handled those rockets launchers. On one occasion the rocket launchers got lost, disappeared, only to be returned later on.

The rocket launchers aren't so small, how can they get lost?

They did get lost, they did.

What was the unit called?

I think it was called „Bregava", but I am not sure.

Ok.

I am not really sure about that part of the story. We did not consider them to be a serious unit. I know that they had their headquarters in the former military barracks in Gubavica. I met their commander, but I don't remember his name. We were together two or three times. We were not entirely sure of them, they didn't inspire confidence, and we didn't give them a more responsible position on the defence line. Although that part of the defence line was not a very hard one to hold, because the armies had already stopped the attacks. Well, we held our positions, Serbs held

theirs. There were provocations, shots and other minor incidents. However we did not allow the Muslims to cover the most difficult positions on the defence line, where we expected the Serbs to strike, because we were generally unsure of them. That is how it all was, I think ...Rotation of soldiers took place, the line continued to be held. On one occasion, the HVO unit from Čapljina was stationed next to us. We were connected to the Muslim unit which was stationed along the south part of the defence line. The defence line was broken there and we spread our people and covered it. I know that we couldn't gather their unit together on that spot again, and we covered the defence line by our own people when the unit finally came back together with reinforcements from Čapljina.

From Čapljina?

From Čapljina, yes. We managed to hold the line – the exact word for it was at the time to “stitch it back together”. As soon as it was broken through, it had to be stitched back together. We managed to stitch it back together at the time, and later on our duty was to break through the Serb defence line and retake positions in Drenovac. A part of the unit went in direction of Stolac... I think it was a company or part of our company which took over the defence line on Drenovac. That means that we held the lines both in Gubavica and in Drenovac. After some time we agreed to withdraw from Gubavica and take over the complete responsibility over zone from Drenovac to Čavaš Gradina. At that time, one morning when our troops had already withdrawn from the area, we stayed in the village waiting for signalmen to arrive and collect the cable which had been used for communications. We had to collect it, because we had encountered great difficulties in finding that sort of cable. We didn't have cables like that. The signalmen came and we remained that morning in the village and were stationed at the private house. A brother of the owner of the house brought us sour milk for breakfast all the while acting strangely. It all seemed a bit odd to us. We had really good relationship with them before and

we asked him to come and sign a minutes on takeover of the house. We wanted to be sure that everything was ok, that nothing was destroyed or taken, so that we wouldn't have any problems later. However, he told us that he would return and in his absence we discussed his strange behaviour. Now, I cannot remember his name. We didn't have any concrete idea on what was going on. In the meantime, one of their soldiers, a Muslim soldier came to us and demanded a permit to leave for Čapljina. At that time permits were issued to the soldiers allowing them to leave the defence line. We told him that we had nothing to do with that any more, but he insisted. As far as I remember we wrote some kind of paper for him. The signalmen collected the cable and the rest of the equipment such as telephones, for we did not have a lot of radio equipment at the time. I gave one of them a radio station and kept another radio station in my possession. He called me from Bivolje Brdo and told me: „The road is blocked“. “How come the road is blocked? I asked. „Well very simply, the road is blocked and machine gun is pointed at us“. „By whom?“ I asked. And he responded: „It seems by the Muslim unit“. I told them to come back and called the operational group in Čapljina led by Obradović, he is a general today, to find out what was going on. „What is going on“?, I asked. He said: „You did not leave? You are now surrounded“. “By whom“?, I asked. “By Muslims”. He said: “The conflict started on Bivolje Brdo and you are now surrounded“! I left to talk to somebody at their headquarters and found their commander eating breakfast...

Which headquarters?

At the Brigade Headquarters, I think it was called „Bregava" ...

Muslim?

Muslim Brigade, I and a courier went there. When we were passing by, I saw that

Muslim soldiers were rounded up, and one of them while were approaching them, started singing: „HVO leads us on.“ I turned to him and jokingly asked him: „Do you know that song?“ He said: „Yes I do!“ I said: „It’s good that you know the song!“ We noticed that situation was tense.

Was the situation tense or not?

It was tense. It was tense. We were cut off and couldn't leave. I looked at the commander and asked him: „What is going on?". He responded in a nice and correct way: „I don't have any influence here, I don't have them under my control those guys from Čapljina".

The commander said that?

The commander of that unit said. „The guys from Čapljina did that", .., „Well, who are those guys from Čapljina, are they your people?" ... „Yes, they are ours", and added ... „but not under my command.". When we returned to the village, we sat in the car and came to the check point which was closed for us. I think that in the meantime Obradović sent somebody to help us. I think that the man was called Leko, and we met at the check point. The people knew all of us. We came out among them and there wasn't any problem, they moved and we passed through the check point. Immediately before reaching Čapljina we saw our guys, HVO guys, establishing a defence line facing towards the Muslim units. As far as I found out, there had not been any special conflict between our forces. In the meantime, we talked to our guys in Ljubuški, and they were on their way to reach us and get us out of the encirclement. That was the first conflict between the Muslim forces and us.

Did you hear shots?

I did not hear any shots then, except that I heard some individual shots, but at that time people fired from time to time...

There weren't any

wounded?

No, I didn't know of any

wounded.

Have you ever found out who actually started the conflict, who was the one to ...? How did the conflict happen? That happened in June 1990?

In 1993. No, no sorry in

1992.

In June 1992?

In June 1992. I don't know exactly. There were stories later on, all kinds of stories, to tell you honestly I didn't much care about why and how.

When was that, what did we say?

That happened ... we came to Gubavica in June, or end of May 1992. We were there two, three months. In summer in 1992, it could have been July or August. Or maybe even September.

Please, tell me, until the incident which we are currently discussing, the relationship between Croats and Muslims was o.k.?

Yes, the relationship was o.k.

There weren't any tensions, problems, some signs that problems might arouse?

No, we couldn't feel any tensions, we were not sure whether they were ready to defend their village up there. Maybe it was because of our own insecurity but we had an impression that we had not been able to rely on them entirely. But the relationship between us was correct.

Did you find out later on who caused the conflict? Who closed down the road? Who were those people, who did that?

No I didn't. I only know what the commander in Gubavica told us. He said that the men were from Čapljina, that the conflict broke out down there and that he did not have any jurisdiction to order them to let us through.

Ah I see. But you managed to get through, is that right?

Yes, we did. Without any problems at all.

What happened next?

After that incident, we were deployed in Drenovac, holding the defence line there. As a matter of fact, I was not in Gubavica all the time, because I had already been stationed on defence line in Drenovac and I was on my way back and forth, moving from Gubavica to Drenovac all the time. There were sporadic incidents with the Serbs, but no serious conflicts, I would merely call these incidents minor provocations. In the beginning, they shelled us with more than 400 or 500 grenades daily...

Who they?

Serbs, Serb forces. That happened in Drenovac. I remember some local Muslims from Drenovac. Our army was accommodated at their houses. Where did we stop? Ah, yes in Drenovac. Mostly, the army carried out normal activities there in order to stabilise the defence line. There wasn't any special ...

After the event which occurred in summer 1992, did you continue to hold positions together with the Muslims? Were they present there?

No. In this area where our army was located there weren't any Muslims. We held the position there in direction of Stolac, Drenovac and Čavaš, Popovo polje in fact. Only rarely we saw some Muslim residents who lived there. We did not have any problems within our zone of responsibility, especially regarding the Muslim population. We held those positions until July, or even September 1993. In the meantime, our constant problem was how to persuade people to go to the defence line. We spent 80% of our energy in persuading

people to go to the frontline.

Voluntarily?

Voluntarily, yes. If we managed to persuade only sixty out of hundred soldiers to go to the defence line we were happy. We covered the area where there weren't many conflicts.

Was mobilisation declared? Were people mobilised? Did they respond? What was the response ? How did you manage to fill in people?

Well yes, people responded. We filled them in, the official mobilisation was declared, and I cannot remember the exact date. However, the declaration of mobilisation did not play an important role. People responded mostly because of their own reasons. You couldn't do much with a company where 50 out of 100 people had their own reasons for going or not going. Some were frustrated by the fact that their neighbours did not come, or that a distinguished person from Ljubuški didn't come, or other numerous reasons. When you had more than 50% of people who all agreed among themselves not to go to the frontline until the company was filled to 80 or 90% of people most of our energy was spent in persuading them to go to the defence line voluntarily. There weren't any forceful means. As a matter of fact you couldn't make anyone do anything. You had some kind of headquarters. And I say some kind of headquarters. I considered our headquarters to be rather good, in a sense that its members were ready and able to organise and form the defence line. However most of the HQ staff did not have any military training and education. They were not professional soldiers. You only had individuals who were better organisers than the others. All of that was, how I would explain that, mostly a waste of time. On the other hand you also

had people who really wanted to fight but were frustrated about the fact that others refused to join the fight or were not mobilised at all etc and they in the end joined those who did not wish to go. But anyway, we somehow managed to hold the defence lines in our particular zones of responsibility. As a matter of fact the war was reduced only the question of being able to hold the defence line. We did not undertake any attacks or advances through the enemy line. In July 1993 a replacement of a brigade commander took place.

I am interested in the period before July 1993. We mentioned the meeting before, but it is important to record it as well, which took place in March 1993 at the cinema hall. Were you present there at that meeting?

No.

You were not present?

I was not present at the meeting at the cinema hall but I heard stories regarding the meeting. The meeting was held in order to discuss problems of organisation and unwillingness and refusal of soldiers to go to the frontline and hold a defence line. I know that General Praljak was present at the meeting. As far as I was informed army disorganisation and refusal of soldiers to go to the defence line was discussed. Concretely, since I was not present at the meeting I cannot talk in detail about it.

You mentioned General Praljak. I am interested in finding out how well do you know General Praljak? How often did you meet him? On which particular occasions did you meet him?

Well I met General Praljak when the problems regarding soldiers' refusal to

go to the terrain were discussed. That was nothing unusual in that, because we were constantly facing same problems. From time to time, the meetings were held. In fact we often discussed how to maintain and protect the zone of responsibility that we were in charge of. Among other things, rotation of commanders was going on, and it all happened in July.

You said that you remember the meeting which was held at the HQ. You said that you saw Praljak for the first time there?

Yes, I did.

What did you talk about?

Well, we mostly discussed problems regarding soldiers and their reluctance to live for the defence line. We also discussed other problems which we faced in Čapljina and overall problems which we faced in our region.

What were the most current problems which you discussed? Well for example at that meeting which you remember. First meeting with General Praljak?

I think that it was my first meeting with Praljak. Well, mostly we talked about problems regarding the refusal of soldiers to go to the terrain and we also discussed issues related to disorganisation. Part of the army was dissatisfied with their military leaders and part of the army was dissatisfied with the civilian authorities. Some of us believed that we could have had a better organisation. I think that we could have done it better, but that's another story now. Mostly those were the issues which we were dealing with.

Do you remember what Praljak said on that occasion? Why do you remember that meeting? Did he shout at the meeting? Did something make him angry?

I remember that he compared our situation with the situation in

Sunja.

Ah, ok.

All of us were complaining about the lack of equipment, insufficient number of men and other things. I remember very well that Praljak said how he had managed to hold and protect the defence line in Sunja, how he had used all possible ways and available means in doing that. I remember his story because we laughed when he mentioned how he had even put some microphones in front of the defence lines in order to be able to detect approaching enemy forces. He mostly accused the HQ staff for their incompetence. I am not sure but I think that he said that some of us were incompetent and not fit to lead the men. He also said that we had to take entirely different approach and that would be; addressing people, talking to them and being first to go the defence line, leading the way. Whether he shouted or not I don't remember. I think he did. He shouted at one of the commanders. But mostly he insisted on better organisation of our army which had been facing numerous problems.

And what opinion did you have about the man when you first met him? Did his story and his requests seem logical and justified – to you and all other people who were present at the meeting?

We had already been aware of all those things which he pointed out to us. He demanded from us all that we should have done anyway. However, almost 90% of the things he had been complaining about we had already tried to change and improve. But it wasn't easy to do that in the circumstances and because our local community was a very small community and everybody knew everybody. Each man knew that his neighbour hadn't gone to the war. Then, the one who went to the frontline accused the one who hadn't gone to war. Praljak seemed to be a man who sincerely came to the region to defend it. Perhaps he raised his voice, but we also raised voices at the meeting. But there was nothing more to it than a wish to improve the army's ability to operate.

Tell me about your further meetings with Praljak, did you meet again?

I have to tell you that I spent a lot of time on the frontline later on. I hadn't met General Praljak often. The next time I saw him again was in Uskoplje or Gornji Vakuf, on Pidriš.

When was that?

That was on July 31, 1993. I am not sure, because my colleagues are also unsure of the exact dates. I don't know whether it was on 31 or on 1 that we met him at the Prozor HQ.

You mean you saw him there again? As far as I know you had met him earlier.

Yes, we saw him there again. Actually we met him again in Prozor. The three of us came under the orders of our commander who had sent us on patrol because it was arranged that the Ljubuški Brigade should be stationed along

the Uskoplje frontline according to the previous agreement.

That means that you came to Prozor, three of you came to Prozor first?

Yes, when the three of us arrived to Prozor we met Praljak and went for a drink with him together. I know for sure that he was not in a good shape. He looked as if he needed sleep. He seemed frustrated by the current situation in the area and had a feeling that the Croatian units would soon abandon the defence line and withdrew from Uskoplje. He told us to go and talk to the guys in operational groups and find out as much as possible about the situation and suggested that we accompany him to the frontline the following day.

The meeting in Prozor, you say that Praljak looked as if he had been in need of sleep... Can you remember a bit more about the meeting? What did Praljak tell you in informal way while you were having a drink? What bothered him? What was the situation like on the frontline at the time? What were the most usual problems?

The army faced problems on the frontline. I think that Bugojno had already happened. Bugojno had fallen. Bugojno was a blow to the Croatian army. He felt problems among the soldiers who were stationed along the defence line in Uskoplje region. They had already told him that they would abandon their positions along the defence line.

He told you that on the occasion?

Yes. He did not openly speak about it, but we knew that he meant that. He talked to us in a rather slow and gentle way which made us wonder later on: „What is going on? There must be something wrong“.

I did not understand you when you say that he talked to you slowly and gently...

Slowly, in a way that we saw how exhausted he was, and he talked to us as if nothing out of usual had been happening. He mentioned problems on the defence line, but he said it like this: „Tomorrow we shall go and check the defence line... you can ask the operatives about our and their positions“. When I say their, I refer to the Muslim positions. He added: “When your army arrives, we shall see where to deploy the soldiers“. We always demanded that our units be connected to each other and stationed next to each other, as much as it was possible. We always wanted to have the control of our own zone of responsibility and to take care of it. That is what we told him and requested that our soldiers be deployed next to each other and connected in that way. We went and talked to the operatives. The map hanging on the wall was out of date and we couldn't see and understand anything from it. I knew some of those places but I couldn't recognise anything. Nothing was clear to me. I even joked about it: „The best thing would be to ask the cook“. One of us said: „What cook, why are you joking around, what do you mean“? Then I said: „The cook knows the whereabouts of our units because he takes food to them therefore he will direct us to our guy's positions“.

The situation was that bad?

It was disastrous, the situation was a disaster.

Could you explain it to me a bit more? When we say «bad situation» - what do we mean by it, what's the main reason for calling it bad? What impression did you have when you arrived to the area?

We got the impression from the army which was hanging around the place. We talked to the soldiers who were passing through the area, coming and leaving. We

did not know many of them.

My question was, actually, what made the situation bad? How did you come to the conclusion that the situation was bad? What was bad?

Well I just told you, we gathered all that from our conversation with soldiers who were passing through the town, coming and leaving...

What were they saying?

They complained that they had been abandoned, they had felt cheated by the Herzegovinians who didn't care about them. Furthermore they said that they had been sold and other similar things. The soldiers were very exhausted because they had spent a lot of time on the defence lines. They had waited for a long time for a rotation to take place and for help, reinforcements to arrive. We concluded, better to say, I concluded the following, because I am a bit more pessimistic than the others, and I told my colleagues: „These guys are going to abandon the defence lines tonight“. My fellow soldiers told me: „Common, you are always so pessimistic“. However, it really happened that night. That was the fact. That night the soldiers left the defence lines. In the meantime our commander called us and told us, although everything was spoken in code, that part of our unit would be retaking abandoned positions on the defence line that night. When we first started off to Uskoplje we had been told by our commander that we would be sent to Uskoplje responsibility zone within 10 or 20 days. I was surprised by the turn of the events and I asked our commander: „What is going on“, „Don't ask anything! Wait for your people and try to accommodate them, part of the army shall retake the positions on defence lines“. We waited for their arrival. They came after midnight and we accommodated them at the school premises.

And it all happened while the rest of the army had already started abandoning the defence positions? Were you aware of the fact that soldiers were leaving the positions?

We knew then... we had known about it even before, because when we came to the HQ where we met General Praljak, I was asked by him to answer the phone. The commander called us and I answered the phone. Before that general Praljak was trying to persuade some people over field phones not leave their positions on the defence lines because that would leave the area unprotected and large patches of the defence line abandoned. He later on begged the commander not to leave the positions. I do not know who was on the other line. It was some commander or somebody else. He was saying: „Please stay, endure a bit longer, people from Ljubuški will come, people from Čitluk will come“. I don't know who else he mentioned, and then ordered him again to stay.

Can you remember a bit more about that telephone conversation? What happened? Praljak talked and you don't know to whom?

I don't know exactly with whom.

But you were present and heard general Praljak, you heard him and saw what he was doing and how? You saw how he begged a man on the other line?

Yes, he begged the commander to hold the positions and to endure until

morning, when reinforcements were supposed to come.

What else was he telling him? What else?

He was saying: „You mustn't leave the positions! You mustn't leave the positions because then the entire defence line would be abandoned all the way to Prozor“.

Ok. Besides begging – did he try ordering them to stay?

He first ordered them to stay and hold on until the following morning regardless of various problems. Then he begged them to hold on until the following morning. He asked the other man on the other line not to abandon the positions all the while promising that the reinforcements would arrive. He gave him his word and said that help would arrive in the morning, and that the positions mustn't be abandoned. However, we somehow received the impression that the positions had already been abandoned and they had actually been abandoned.

All right, you do not know who the other guy was and what was he saying, you don't know that – but what did General Praljak look like? How did he seem to you after ending the telephone conversation? How did he look?

How did he look? Well, I don't know whether I can say that he looked bad. He seemed low in spirits since the entire situation was very difficult for him. I think you might say that he looked bad and he looked partly disappointed, and partly angry...

I have a concrete question which is: while you were looking at the general Praljak during the conversation, was general Praljak in charge of the situation or not, was he controlling the situation or not?

My impression was that he couldn't control the situation at all. If he had been able to control the situation he wouldn't have begged the soldiers to stay. He did try to order them to stay, but when that didn't work, he begged them to stay on

the defence line all the while telling them that men from Ljubuški would come. We realized at that moment that the entire responsibility was transferred to us. Praljak's psychological state of mind went down. I would say that that he was really devastated, sad, and unhappy. I don't know how to describe him...as disillusioned, and he had a very hard time. We also had a hard time because we realised what awaited us.

All right.

After we accommodated the army that arrived from Ljubuški, we went to lie down a bit. It was somewhere around 2 a.m. I do not exactly know the time, who looked at the watch anyway? We got up at half past 4. Prozor was full of the soldiers who were leaving, running, abandoning Prozor on tractors etc..

Was it only the army?

Both, civilians and the army.

Civilians and the army.

Yes, civilians and the army. They were all mixed. You were, for instance offered a machine gun for a pack of cigarettes. Rocket launchers were transported on tractors and small trucks. Mostly there were more tractors than anything else. I remember that there was a small cannon taken away and drawn by the tractor, and I know that we commented: „What is going on here, we are supposed to take the positions on the defence lines and they are taking our tools away from us.“. In other words, we were angry and frustrated about the entire

situation. We couldn't figure out why the residents were leaving the region while we were sent to help and defend them. A courier from HQ came and summoned us before the general. We entered and he said: „Listen guys – he was rather cool - the situation is not good and we have to retake the abandoned positions“. We did not know the whereabouts of the abandoned positions nor what was the situation like up there. We assumed that the Muslim forces had already occupied the abandoned positions. The head of the Brigade, Jura Rupčić, said: „General, I am not issuing such an order. You come among the soldiers and you order them yourself– if they decided to go on we shall lead in front of them“.

What did General say?

General said:” You go down there, I shall be down in a minute". We rounded up but felt really bad - and even if we had been professional army we would have felt that way – when you have, according to our assessment over 1000 people, both soldiers and civilians, running away you feel badly. There were only 200 of us. Honestly I thought that the army wouldn't start off at all. You had a situation where nobody could order you because what we were about to do was madness. The General joined us and he spoke out loud. He was talking to us and to them and to all of us: „Listen men, these assholes“ sorry for the expressions...

Say it! Tell me exactly the way he said it!

...well as far as I remember he said exactly the following: „These assholes are abandoning the positions, the positions remained abandoned! Those among you who got guts will be led by your general and your commanders will follow me! Those who have guts, get on the bus.“ Nobody said a word. People got on the bus, and we were off into the direction of Makljen. In that situation,

when we reached our positions, we did not know where we were or what we needed. All the time people were passing through and running away. I remember that only a unit from Ždrimce consisting of some 30 people remained on the position. They stayed and said: „We shall not leave our houses“. That was a part of the company called Bruno Bušić. Some of them were professional soldiers, some 15 people. Hundred of us came. And then Praljak was constantly saying: „ I need some 10 men here to “mend” the line here. I need some 10 men there to “mend” the line etc...“ We felt awful. We thought that we would never be able to collect all those men again because we were deploying them all around. We preferred that the entire platoons be deployed on one position, instead of only ten persons, because we counted that it would be more of them on one point and that it would be much easier for them to survive. Those few days we hardly slept at all. I did not sleep for 70 hours until the defence line was formed, free passage for transport of food was secured, communications were established between the units, and until the situation became stabile. As a matter of fact, we were not attacked often by the Muslims, because they did not know what was going on. I think that they thought it was some kind of trap which we had set for them.

Yes. In any case, that means that the abandoned positions had not been taken by Muslims?

Some of them had not been taken but some were occupied by the Muslim forces, in Vilić Polje, but those were only two or three positions.

Other positions were all retaken?

Almost all of the positions were retaken except the ones on Crni Vrhovi. I think there was a unit which abandoned the positions there. Whose unit? How? I do not know. We were stationed far bellow because we did not know where

to go and what to do.

Did you meet Praljak there?

Well I had been meeting Praljak every day along the defence line. It was a very tense situation and we had often met him. We wanted to see him and be close to him because we wanted to know what was going on.

And how did the situation develop ... I am interested, let's say, in situations where you were close to Praljak, and chaos and his attempts to rescue the situation? How did Praljak behave? Do you remember any other conversations that he might have had with other people? How did he seem to you? Did you believe that he would succeed in defending the line?

Listen, as soon as we started to deploy people we realised that the situation was not that critical. General Praljak inspired confidence to everybody. We trusted him and knew that he wouldn't expose us and put us in dangerous situation where people would get killed. To be honest, when we started off towards Makljen, my heart jumped in my throat. I was not afraid to die but was afraid that two hundred people would die.

You thought that then?

Yes, because the situation seemed hopeless: How were we to defend our positions with two hundred men when thousands were running away? My assessment was that over thousand people fled the area. How were we to stop the offensive with 200 people only.

You were on the bus?

Yes. No, as a matter of fact, I was in front of the bus, in a jeep.

And where was the General?

In front of us.

Where was he?

I think he was also in a jeep.

Was there a tank or something like that onto which Praljak climbed later on? Do you know anything about that?

No I don't know anything. He did not climb the tank then. We didn't have any tanks then.

Later, something allegedly happened, and he climbed somewhere...

I heard about it, but I did not see that and cannot talk about it. I am not even sure when that story happened or whether it had occurred earlier, before we came to the positions.

All right, you are not aware of that then. Have you noticed anything else, anything of importance regarding general Praljak's reactions, as a human being and a commander in such circumstances?

It is my belief that one could only have wished for such a commander, he had charisma and when they looked at him, people just couldn't say no to him. At least those men who really wished to stay on their positions and defend the line. What actually contributed to the fact that people abandoned their positions – that is something I do not know anything about. I know that various stories were circling around, stories about frustration and revolt against Herzegovinians

against people such as Mate Boban, Grude... people felt betrayed, sold, abandoned and similar stories. Regarding the General himself, many others would have lost their heads in such a situation. Lost their minds. Many would not know what to do, how to solve such a situation. I openly say that if I had been in his shoes, I wouldn't have known what to do. I could only have blamed myself. Banged my head against the wall. He at least tried to organise, to stop offensive, hold onto the existing defence lines.

Tell me, when he walked in front of all those people and when he said what you have just told me a few minutes ago. „These assholes are leaving, we should go...“ Was that a tense situation?

It was an extremely tense situation, but he did not look that tense. You can only imagine how tense it was. You have soldiers that you are in charge of, soldiers that should go and retake defence lines, watch some ten times more soldiers abandoning those same defence positions.

Were those soldiers angry? Were they...

No, they were simply indifferent. They were angry at the fact that people were abandoning the homes that they came to protect.

But nobody opposed Praljak, is that right? Everybody went there?

No, nobody opposed Praljak. At least at that moment. As far as I know. There might have been some complaining and remarks, but publicly nobody came out and said anything.

Tell me, later on, have you met Praljak on other frontlines?

After Vakuf, or Uskoplje, as you wish, we returned to our former positions. I think that happened in December 1993. We again encountered numerous problems with soldiers abandoning their stations along the defence line and leaving. Thus the entire months of November and December we had been spending in stitching defence line back together. We even had a situation when our HQ staff, four or five of us, went to hold the entire defence line on Crni Vrhovi consisting of 15 to 16 bunkers, even General Praljak did not know anything about that.

Four of you held 15-16 bunkers?

Well yes, four or five of us. The army left, replacements did not come as yet. We simply went to those positions and held the line.

That was also chaotic?

Yes. During some time, the army was coming on a regular basis. However every two to three months problems regarding the army and defence positions appeared again. The company commander had to come to Ljubuški two or three days in advance in order to contact and talk to people and persuade them to take the positions. The soldiers thought: „We are here but where are local residents“. Later on, part of the army and locals slowly begun to return and join the forces, but people got saturated and our army withdrew from those positions on December 17 or 18. The replacements should have arrived but didn't. The HQ faced various problems. The commander was replaced by a new one. I was in Vakuf when I called the HQ and asked to talk to the commander. A man introduced himself and said that he was the new commander. I did not know. I realised that he was new but I didn't recognise his voice. The army was transformed and we became a part of homeland regiment. That happened in

April. We held positions in Bijelo Polje and Đubrani. The headquarters was located in Đubrani. I hadn't met Praljak later on, I have to admit. I left the army in April 1994.

And that meant the end of your army career?

That meant the end. Regarding myself, I know that I had a conversation with the commander where I told him that I would finish my last terrain work and agreed to be summoned to the bunker, but I also said that I wouldn't stay at headquarters any longer. There were some internal disagreements and other things.

Tell me please, at the end of the interview, have we forgotten to mention something important?

Well, it is possible that we might have

forgotten to mention something important.

... We probably have.

We probably have, but I cannot remember any other important moments, or moments that I would consider important.

We shall turn the dictaphone off and if you remember something important we can record it later on.

Ok.