

STANKO PRIMORAC - ČANE

Ljubuški

November 2005

The interview is recorded and registered under the following label

cane
32,5 MB
duration 01:41:52
cane2
4,86 MB
duration 13:12
cane3
14,2 MB
duration 44:34

The interview was conducted in Ljubuški

Dictaphone is switched on. I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself first by telling me your name, surname and place of birth.

My name is Stanko Primorac, called Čane. I was born on January 15, 1969 in Ljubuški. I graduated from elementary and secondary school in Ljubuški and completed my military service in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). Immediately after completion of my military service, the war in Slovenia and Croatia started and later spread on to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). I as well as majority of other normal people realised that the war would spread throughout the entire territory of Croatia and BiH. In September 1991 I entered the Croatian Army (HV) self-willingly. I joined 4th Brigade within the Croatian Defence Forces (HOS), which was then a part of the Croatian National Guard (ZNG) and the 4th HV brigade. Jozo Radanović was my commander. After completing military training we were sent to the south front. The front line included terrains from the bay of Bistrina towards Pelješac peninsula. Most of our military missions were conducted there. We were on a mission in Kruševo in Zadar once. When Kruševo fell we spent couple of days in Split military barracks and were deployed in various terrains as needed. At the end of February 1992, the JNA embarked on a full-scale aggression on BiH. It started even earlier. I was in the vicinity of the village of Ravno, today the municipality of Ravno, when Ravno fell. Well that was the first municipality attacked by the JNA. They didn't stop at that. They continued by attacking Stolac and Popovo polje aiming to capture Ploče harbour and the Metković line alongside the river Neretva. They planned to partition south Croatia and BiH and create Great Serbia according to some imagined grand scheme in their heads. I came to Ljubuški at the beginning of March joined by other guys from the towns of Stolac, Čapljina, Ljubuški, Tomislavgrad and Livno. All those guys who self-willingly enlisted into the HV received an honourable discharge from the HV in case they wanted to return to their native towns and help in defence against the JNA aggression. That is how I came as well. I came as a member of a platoon formed by some 30-35 guys from 9th HOS Corps. We immediately put ourselves under the command of the late general Blaž Kraljević. There had already existed some kind of military structure. The HOS headquarters were situated in Ljubuški. At the beginning of March we were sent

to the area of Čavaš and Pobrđe, Stolovi, high-plains in front of the village Ravno which belonged to the territory of BiH. Practically the entire line from Stolac in direction of Bistrina and Ploče was defended at the time. On April 10 Stolac fell, the 606 elevation, the most dominant elevation in the area. Stolovi fell as well and as a result the line in Čeljevo, Dračevo and Drenovac was directly endangered. A part of that line had fallen already. On April 11, our units were regrouped and defence line was strengthened to a certain extent. Additional units came from Čitluk and Čapljina and we finally got our leave after very long fifteen days. I returned to Čapljina then. On April 12 we were allotted a building at the Čapljina tobacco station by Čapljina municipal headquarters which we used for our own purposes. We had three organised platoons already and were named the independent HOS company and our men had already gained some experience after fighting for the HV. It was not to be compared with the HV military formation but taking into account the circumstances in Čapljina and Ljubuški at the time it was a well organised military formation. There was no civil authority, the army was self-organised to some extent, many things were improvised, there was no electricity, water and there was a general chaos on. We arrived to Čapljina on April 12 and I met general Praljak that same day. I realised that he was the man at the top of chain of command structure, that he was the man who organised defence of Čapljina. There was a specific situation in Čapljina at the time. The JNA was still holding the barracks and was shooting at the civilians and flats in Čapljina. Across the barracks to the east run the river Neretva and east of the river you had other heavily fortified JNA artillery troops. It was our duty in Čapljina to defend ourselves from the JNA units shooting from the barracks. They attempted to enter the city, cross over the bridge and create additional chaos. We held two lines. We had to hold the barracks and defend the line which had already connected Mostar, Orlovac, over Buna, south part of Međugorje, Dretelj and the city of Čapljina and so on to the south to Gabela. Bellow Gabela the line went across the river Neretva. The south part was defended in the villages of Čeljevo, Klepcirna on the border line of Klepac and Čeljevo, Gnjišta over Crno brdo up to Drenovac and Stolovi. That was a rather large area to cover which is perhaps impossible for the military analysts to understand. In any case we were inferior to the JNA and Chetnik paramilitary troops. They had already controlled all dominant positions during peace. Well let me go back to the meeting with Praljak. First thing that I noticed was his negative attitude towards me, better to say towards HOS. When we got to know each other better he told me that he had had rather negative experiences with the HOS units all over Croatian battle grounds in the past. He claimed that we were one nation and that we should have a single army and a unified chain of command. Although we

have never had any problems in Čapljina, general Praljak had certain problems with the HOS units on other front lines in BiH. Taking into account his earlier negative experience perhaps he thought that all HOS members were the same. However he changed his mind later. A day or two after we were first introduced, he came to inspect my men and I formed them into ranks. As an experienced soldier he understood that those were all quite normal guys from wider area of BiH which had already been occupied at that time. Nobody forced those guys to join the HOS, they were all volunteers. Since the situation in Čapljina was rather chaotic we told general Praljak that we would put our forces at his disposal and under his command and that we would carry out his orders and behave as a real and organised army. After that moment we did not have any problems. There were some individual incidents and fights caused by drunken soldiers and animosity between HOS and HVO soldiers which provoked his stormy reactions. The HOS members thought highly of themselves because they enlisted in the army self-willingly and they resented some HV soldiers. They all volunteered and were part of the 1st company of the HOS 1st corps. It could be said that it was one of the most elite units among HOS in that part of the battlefield in particular. And my humble self was the commander of that company. That company was well organised and resembled real army taking into account the existing circumstances. We carried out almost all orders by general Praljak regardless of whether the orders referred to taking over the JNA barracks or holding the line on the east part of the battle ground in Čapljina and defending it from the enemies on the east side of the river Neretva. Let me tell you how we captured the JNA barracks in Čapljina. Throughout the period from April 12 to April 20-22 when the barracks were finally captured, I cannot remember the exact date, we were ordered to control east auxiliary exit to the barracks which seemed as the most logical exit for the reservists and JNA soldiers. The main entrance was too wide and would drive them out into the open making them an easy target there. Throughout these days Čapljina was under a heavy shelling and a few air-raids, by both planes and helicopters meaning that it was hit by all sorts of weapons. Naturally, they did not select the targets, the flats were hit, women, children and elderly people were killed. Soldiers were killed as well. Chaos reigned and the only place that you could turn to for help were the headquarters for defence of Čapljina headed by general Praljak. The HQ was located at the J&B hotel, I think it was called like that. General Praljak and a few of his associates were in command there. A mayor, a president of the municipality of Čapljina or a vicar would appear from time to time there. Civilian authority structure did not exist at the time and thus each small or serious problem had to be dealt by general Praljak and J&B HQ. The commanders of

all units deployed in the territory of Čapljina municipality went there for a daily briefing with general Praljak. All kinds of topics were discussed there: recent enemy movements as well as the most banal or basic problems. For example there was a woman with child who came and sought help because her house had been hit by a grenade or two soldiers had gotten into fight and there were no military or civilian police to resolve the matter. There was no water, electricity etc... Only military kitchen functioned and we received food on time. I would like to describe in more detail airborne desant operation to get out reservists and JNA high-ranking army officers from the barracks. All military and civilian targets were heavily pounded by thousands grenades that morning. The church was systematically shelled, as well as J&B headquarters. They obviously knew well the positions of our command and our army. The helicopters flew in very low that morning over the valley of the river Bregava and landed inside the barracks and ten minutes later they took off and evacuated the officers from the barracks. Before we knew what was happening...we didn't try to stop them. I think that we were ordered by general Praljak to let them go if they tried to leave without causing any further damage to the city and civilians.

Was that general's order or do you think that it was general's order?

It was a general's order. A few days earlier he talked to them over the megaphone and demanded their surrender. He guaranteed security for them in case they decided to surrender and leave the barracks and stop shooting civilian targets. However, we were careful because they were heavily armed with a few tanks, heavy artillery, anti-air cannons and machine-guns. If they had known how badly armed we were they could have crushed us without any problem at all. Obviously they were afraid because they thought that we were better equipped. The general ordered us not to fire at them in case they decided to leave the barracks carrying their personal arms only and in case they stopped causing any more damage to the city. We were to let them cross over the bridge. However they evacuated with helicopters. Nobody fired at the helicopters on their way in or out. None of the soldiers fired their guns. After that we carefully entered the barracks. The general entered with the army through the main entrance. Somewhere near the main entrance cries were heard from the soldiers locked in one big hall. They shouted that they were unarmed and willing to surrender, that officers locked them up and left them there because there had not been enough place for them on the helicopters. Then I heard general's voice over the megaphone warning us that young soldiers and

prisoners were not to be touched and harmed in any way. We supposed that only young soldiers and cadets stayed in the barracks. He said that not a single hair on prisoner's heads should be touched.

That was over the megaphone?

Yes, he specifically warned all the companies, as well as HOS, that they should pay attention to the safety while entering the barracks and that they should treat the prisoners humanly. He often mentioned some conventions. I am not a professional soldier, but I have never treated a prisoner badly, because I acted in good conscience and I never did any harm to the prisoners or others because I did not wish in opposite situation that such things be done to me. Thus we treated the prisoners humanly and especially when we entered the barracks because we knew that young soldiers (19-20 years old) were there. There were a few Serbs, Croats, Macedonians and Albanians at the barracks. There were all under 20-years of age. Those soldiers were receiving humane treatment according to the conventions. The general always repeated at briefings that prisoners should be treated humanly in accordance with conventions. Most of us did not know what that meant at the moment, but we simply knew that prisoners should be treated humanly and that was it. After the evacuation of the barracks the situation in the city calmed down a bit. The reserve army at the barracks had been a great burden for the city because you had an enemy company in the heart of the city shooting civilian targets constantly. From the moment the barracks were captured there came a great relief for the city. From that moment on the preconditions for a systematic organisation of the army units were created, although the enemy situated on the east bank of the Neretva river mercilessly pounded the city and choose their targets less carefully. The main targets were Čapljina HQ with general Praljak and the church whose towers were high above other buildings in Čapljina. Both bell-towers were cut in half by grenades and shells. Another example is the case of Serb church which was devastated after it had been hit by the enemy grenade. The church was shelled one afternoon and some soldiers entered and devastated the church over night. The general summoned an emergency meeting in the morning and attempted to conduct an investigation and discover the perpetrator. The church was set on fire and curtains and wood inside the church were burnt. It is important to mention that the Serb church could not have been missed because of the rain of grenades which fell on the city that day.

Praljak immediately intervened?

Yes. Someone took advantage of the situation. A grenade demolished the church's door, somebody entered and tried to set the church on fire. I remember exactly the briefing by the general. He screamed about the responsibility, demanded an investigation to discover the perpetrator. He was extremely angry and explicitly ordered that Serb houses, the Serb church or any other Serb property in Čapljina were not to be touched. The property should be primarily used for defence purposes. And since he was older and more experienced he knew that one day when the war is over everything would come around again. Well this is more or less everything regarding the period spent in Čapljina. At the end of April and at the beginning of May, order was more or less restored in Čapljina. By the order of general Praljak I was sent to the south part of the line across the river Neretva. I was deployed in the village of Višići. We were placed in the village of Višići and we held the line in Čeljevo on a demarcation line between Čeljevo and Klepci, Klepašnica and Crno brdo. Those positions were held by Serbs, by Chetniks. We were stationed down in the valley. The trenches had been dug for us in the field by the engineering squad before we came. After my arrival to the line I was constantly in contact with general Praljak. We held briefings almost every day. We received our orders from him, and we reported everything back to him regarding events on the front line. On May 1, we repulsed the attack by the enemy that is by Chetniks who attempted to break the line. The attack happened exactly at dawn and in the counterattack, when we started after them, near a building called „slaughterhouse“, which actually was some kind of slaughterhouse that had been a part of the meat market before the war, we lost two guys. Tomislav Zone from the village of Višići and the other guy. I cannot remember that guy's name any more, as it happened thirteen years ago. Tomislav Zvone from my company died there. A few more guys were wounded while I suffered only minor injuries. I received medical help and was on leave for three days. Nothing serious. After three days I was back and I stayed there until the Čagalj action. The action took place on June 6 and 7. Nothing significant happened in that period. The line was always actively defended by both HOS and HVO units. We were constantly pounded by artillery attacks, and suffered casualties: deaths and minor injuries. Parallel to that chaotic situation on the front line there was an entire process of establishing, building and forming of the army, civilian protection and police undertaken by general Praljak. I have to say that general Praljak assumed most responsibilities related to civilian protection. He worried whether civilian police and military police were going to function. We, commanders, worked on organisation of civilian protection in the field. It was that simple. The citizens left Čapljina. Even those who had to be in the military uniforms were gone. People fled Čapljina because

it was impossible to live there. The mobilisation was underway and the local units were reinforced. Besides defending the front line, repulsing the attacks and organising counterattacks, Praljak was acting as both, mother and father as well as the commanding officer. I am speaking from my own experience because I had to act as mother and father among men in my own unit. In case things did not work out, everybody looked up to a commander for a solution. On the other hand when a commander issued an order, the response lacked. Being a commander was in some way an honour as well as responsibility. But it was far off from what being a general should have been, a general who was on top of the command structure, who had to act according to conventions, who had to pass the commands from a higher level and onto the lower level... In a normal army, general would normally issue an order in his area of responsibility; check whether that order is being executed and if not he would undertake sanctions against those who failed to carry out the order. The chain of command structure never functioned in that way in our army because the army was formed as we went. On one hand you had HOS, and I can freely speak about it because I was a part of the HOS units from the very beginning. The HOS consisted of people with different attitude regarding the war in BiH; they joined the army self-willingly as volunteers wishing to sacrifice themselves for the state and freedom of their people. They sought somewhat better position for themselves, because they enlisted into the army as volunteers, and not as the HVO reserve units who stayed in the front line 7-10 days and later went on a leave for another 7-10 days, rotated and exchanged. We were all the time in the front line and went on leave only in cases when we were wounded or suffered some kind of other injury. What I wanted to say is that the commander in our army bore the entire and absolute responsibility. In normal army, the commander of the company, as in my case, would issue an order to his sergeant and the sergeant would pass the order onto his squad leader and that would be the end of it. However our army did not operate in such a way, we did not have such a tradition and it wasn't formed as yet. JNA aggression caught us while we were at work in the office, or ploughing the fields etc... Only a few of us, like general Praljak and my humble self, had any experience at all when the war started in Čapljina. We came to Čapljina, found our friends and cousins, and simply talked them into taking a rifle or a gun and joining defence lines. Everything was on fire around us. We did not need lot of time to talk people into taking arms. They willingly took their rifles. Until the Čagalj action our company suffered from a shortage of arms, 10% of our people did not have arms at all. Many HVO units suffered from a shortage of arms as well. I learnt at the briefing, that the HVO company which held the defence line along the river Neretva did not have enough arms for all soldiers within the

company and when the replacements came they gave them their rifles as well. Soldiers lacked ammunition also. Many went to the front, got killed and did not carry enough bullets with them. We were very happy when we had enough ammunition with us. What I wanted to say is that the commander, if he had any authority at all, and general Praljak had the authority, shouldn't ever betray the soldier. As a commander he had to deal directly with problematic soldiers as well as those who weren't soldiers. I witnessed numerous situations where general Praljak was ready for everything, even for getting into fight with the soldier who misbehaved. If the subordinate commander or military police fails to arrest the soldier who fires shots, shoots at street lamps etc, does all kinds of stupid things, the chief commander of the municipal HQ or of the entire area of responsibility has to deal with the individual soldier. Military command structure did not exist. There was no military court, military police nor any other authority above a soldier. Some men put military uniforms on, regardless of whether it was HOS or HV, took the rifle and felt indifferent towards everybody. There were also people who felt like Gods when armed. They felt powerful enough to take another person's life, evict person from his house or make him stop in the middle of the road without any reason at all. In fact it was a very chaotic situation where weak men without any predisposition to become soldiers got out of control. I'll express myself in military terms. You had to be madder than the maddest person in your company in order to represent some kind of authority to him. You had to be ready for anything, ready to be fired at or to fire. As simple as that.

Was that a principle followed by Praljak as a commander?

Praljak, as a commander, was ready for everything. I told you a while ago, apart from dealing with the chaos on the front line, he was even ready to confront by himself a person who had drunk half a litter of hard liquor and was firing shots at houses and windows. You are forced to react as a commander and calm him down and be ready for...

You said that you were present in some situations when Praljak reacted? How did he react?

Yes. I cannot remember the names of the soldier, but I recall a particular situation in Čapljina. I remember a drunken soldier at the entrance of tobacco station who was waving his rifle around when the general saw him. The general was passing by and when he saw that something was going on, he

got out of the car and confronted the soldier. He talked, cussed and shouted at the drunken soldier. Naturally, for the soldier in that condition it doesn't mean much who you are. The general then talked to him and reasoned with him. In other words, the general first showed him that he could be even madder than him. After proving to the soldier that he could be even crazier than him he reasoned with him and calmed him down. The soldier finally accepted the criticism and calmed down. There were many similar incidents all around the town. The commanders, apart from all their duties, had to deal with such situations on a daily basis, they had to deal with each individual soldier. Furthermore, Čapljina was a specific place. Many Serbs remained in Čapljina. There were some Muslims within the HOS forces who did not have the best of intentions. I can freely talk about that because I was from the day one in the HOS units. Lots of them joined the HOS troops, finished their basic military training, received arms and then simply disappeared from the company. Many Muslim citizens from Čapljina insisted to join HOS units. However the unit which I am talking about, 1st HOS company, which was deployed in Čapljina, could not be taken for granted and you couldn't pretend there. We were always active in military combat, defending or attacking. There was no place for pretenders. A pretender could pretend for a couple days only, until the first combat. They knew if they joined the company that they could lose everything and gain nothing. The only thing we were offered was to obey and execute orders. If something hits you o.k, if not thanks God for that. Well let me once again refer to the period when the river Neretva was crossed and when the most dominant elevations from which the enemy had shelled a wide area of west Herzegovina were captured. Even Ljubuški was shelled from the high-plains of Domanovići and Gubavica. The river Neretva was crossed in coordinated action on several points in Mostar and Buna as well. We covered the area from south and the area towards Stolac and Drenovac. All dominant elevations such as Klepci, Prebilovci and Domanovići fell. Stolac and Buna were captured and the whole actions lasted from June 7 until June 13. I remember well. It was Saint Anton's Day. It's a day of festivity in Ljubuški, there is a celebration in Ljubuški on that day. On June 13th, we completed the operation by capturing Žegulja and elevations behind and east of Stolac. Logical defence line was formed. From that moment on you could breath freely in Čapljina. Enemy was pushed some 20 km away from Čapljina and Mostar up to Podveležje. The army started to consolidate at the Čapljina barracks after middle of June. The barracks were filled with HVO members. The barracks were later on named after Božan Šimović. Various HVO companies and brigades were formed and normal life slowly returned to the town. Civilians returned to Čapljina and normal life returned with them. Things became easier for the

general, he stopped being father to everybody and people stopped turning to him for every problem. The military units which were formed in June and July 1992 started to resemble a real army. In other words, the situation before crossing the river Neretva and liberation of Stolac, Domanović, Buna and east part of Mostar was similar in all other towns and villages (Mostar, Čitluk) on the front line. Normal conditions for life were created. Soldiers with a certain amount of experience on whose help you could rely on were formed. You got out of a situation you had at the beginning of the war, which seemed hopeless. The units and companies started to resemble real army. It became known which units got involved in some other activities rather than military. There were all kinds of things going on in the field that were impossible to avoid in those circumstances. I guess that such things were inevitable in our as well as in all other wars. Well, my experience with general Praljak later is ... I became a commander of the HOS battalion consisting of three companies. The HOS units grew as well. They formed some kind of army. It was true, we formed a massive battalion consisting of 200 people. General Praljak did not approve of that and told me that the Muslims, (Bosniaks as they are called today) massively joined the HOS forces in order to avoid mobilisation into the HVO. There were tensions between general Praljak and the late general Blažević, who was more concerned with politics than with military issues. I know of several meetings which took place between general Praljak and Blažević always at the insistence of general Praljak. General Praljak claimed that in spite of the fact that the HOS army existed and that its members had joined the army self-willingly that during the combat there should exist some kind of coordination between those two armies and a single commander. Unified chain of command should be respected. In war that is inevitable. If not, you pay a high price. Under no circumstances should there exist a parallel chain of command during combat. We have never had such problems with general Praljak on the terrain. Thanks to his military experience and wide knowledge, as well as our experience, we managed to cope in Čapljina. Simply it was impossible to compete or to boast about who was being a greater Croat, or a greater soldier. We were all together and we coordinated all the actions together. However after the front line was moved east of the town of Stolac normal life returned to the town accompanied by petty political interests and manipulations. Well, I wanted to underline general Praljak's disagreement with creation of two armies. Simply such a situation creates manipulators who play war and who take advantage of the situation for fulfilling their own goals and interests. For instance if you do some stupid thing in HVO you could simply join HOS or vice versa. You allow manipulators, war profiteers and criminals to take advantage of the situation. There was always a chance for a soldier who disobeyed

the order or violated the military rule in the HVO to get out of the entire thing and join HOS. "It doesn't matter, If it doesn't work in HVO I'll simply join HOS". Soldiers often blackmailed their commanders by threatening to leave.

Let us stop for a while here. You said that at some point Praljak was dissatisfied about the formation of the HOS and the division within the army? When was that? When did Praljak react regarding the issue?

He reacted immediately at the very start. I already told you at the beginning of this interview that he was very negative about my arrival to Čapljina. He made a rather frowning face when he saw me. I was very young, I was 23 years old, I looked like a child. He immediately ordered me to deploy my company at the Čapljina tobacco station and warned me that in Čapljina there would be no talk about separate HOS army, that there should exist only one army. He talked as an experienced soldier. I tried to balance it all a bit. I introduced myself to him and told him that I came from Croatia battle grounds with 30-35 experienced soldiers and that neither HOS nor HVO should be put forward. I told him that our priority should be defence from JNA reservists at the barracks. He accepted me and our unit as we were. I was honest with him, and I think my honesty won him. He later came to see us and review our ranks. He realised that we had nothing to do with other soldiers wearing HOS insignias and his previously bad experiences. From that moment on he accepted us. He took no notice of the entire issue until the beginning of July. The issue became urgent at the beginning of July when both armies, the HOS and the HVO, grew massively in numbers. The HOS was formed but something strange happened. Prior to liberation of the barracks in Čapljina there weren't many Muslim residents who were joining us in combat. Suddenly the Muslims returned to Čapljina in great numbers and joined the HOS units. There already existed some sort of agreements between the HOS (its main HQ) and Sarajevo, the Bosnian Army (ABiH). Even some units within the HOS opposed formation of such an army by the late general Blaž Kraljević, who was both my friend and my commander. The late Blaž Kraljević, as I told you earlier, was more a politician than a soldier. He didn't have any military experience whatsoever. He accepted things on the battleground as they happened. At the same time he was a perfect promoter and according to my opinion a very good politician. Naturally, good politicians can also make mistakes. He probably made some mistakes. One who works makes mistakes. The issue related to the HOS army stirred great interest again at the

beginning of July when Muslims massively enlisted in the HOS units.

Let us talk about the period before July 1992. We discussed the negative attitude of Praljak towards formation of HOS units. He insisted on unified line of command, unified army? Is that correct? How did that function in practice until July 7, 1992? Was your unit under command of general Praljak at that time? Did Blaž Kraljević allow that?

Well you see, that depended exclusively on the relationship between me, a commander of the HOS company, and general Praljak. Kraljević did not explicitly forbid me to cooperate with general Praljak. We had to cooperate on the battle front, and Kraljević understood that very well. It was impossible to describe the situation on the field to somebody who was sitting in Ljubuški, and general Blažević had his HQ in Ljubuški at the time. I never had any problems with general Praljak who visited our defence lines several times a day. He greeted each and every soldier, examined bunker by bunker, and discussed major events that happened that day. We tried to solve all those things together. However, when one had to go to Ljubuški which was 20 km away from Čapljina and tried to explain the situation on the field to somebody that was all together very different. Late Kraljević accepted and valued my opinion highly and he respected the relationship between me and general Praljak. He never asked me to refuse an order by general Praljak. That was during the first phase...

Until July 1992?

Yes. Until July 1992. During the first phase of cooperation between us and general Praljak we absolutely put our forces at his disposal and command. We obeyed all his orders. Simply put, maybe those who will listen to this interview one day will understand that as well, sometimes in war men become friends over night. When two good men meet, they need less than 10 minutes to become friends especially in crisis, when people die every minute. You cannot pretend, or play some kind of game, you show your true face, my honesty was rewarded by general Praljak's honesty. I knew that he would never order me to go where he wouldn't dare to go himself or order me to do something impossible. I always acted my best with the means and equipment available to me. Simply I left with my company at the beginning of July after I had returned from Stolac and Buna and all the joint

actions under general Praljak's command. We lost 7-8 men during the battle on the river Neretva and some 10 men were seriously wounded. Many guys suffered minor injuries as well. We completely left the jurisdiction and zone controlled by general Praljak on July 2nd or 3rd. A part of the company stayed in Čapljina and the bravest embarked on other battle missions. You cannot force people to engage in combat if they are afraid or do not wish to fight. We, commanders, always openly talked to our soldiers during the war. It was much better not to take the ones who were afraid to the combat. They could have only made things more complicated for you. It wasn't disgraceful to say: „ I am afraid“. There were some guys who did very brave things at first but later on became depressed and afraid of everything, they went through some kind of psychological crisis or something similar to that. Thus it was not odd that people got scared and remained in Čapljina. The departure of the 1st HOS company on July 2-3 meant leaving the zone and responsibility of general Praljak. We were deployed on the south battlefield of BiH; on Cavaska gradina and Popovo polje. Our troops went all the way south to Orašac, Staro Slano, on the very border between the Republic of Croatia and BiH. That was the position from which the action Čagalj started and enemy was driven to the very edge of Popovo polje. I remained with my company there throughout the month of July. Then something happened there above Osojnik located in the south of BiH. We were given orders to capture elevations Zelenikovac, Ratki boban and Diklić at the very edge of Popovo polje (some 2-3 kilometres within the Republic of Croatia). Since we had been considered elite unit we were ordered to liberate these elevations above Osojnik which the enemy held on the south side of Popovo polje. On August 4, in the morning we were ambushed and seven to eight men were killed while ten were seriously wounded. I was gravely injured and taken to the hospital in Neum. Later on I was transferred to the Split hospital for an operation and I lost all my contacts with general Praljak.

How long did you stay at the hospital?

I stayed at the hospital until August 10. I should have stayed for three weeks. I did not have any very serious inner injuries. I suffered various bones fractures. I was wounded in grenade explosion and hit by a shrapnel first. Half an hour later I was shot by a bullet during evacuation. Fortunately I was wounded only in legs. None of my vital organs were seriously injured thus I recovered rather fast after the incident. I stayed until August 10 in the hospital. I left the hospital at my own risk because Blaž Kraljevic had been assassinated on August 9.

You were at the hospital when Blaž Kraljević was killed?

Yes. They like to call it a conflict between HVO and HOS. I believe that the incident involved the military police or the so-called punishment battalion from Široki brijeg that stopped general Kraljević on the road on his way back from Mostar. How did that happen and what caused the conflict nobody knows as yet. There are no official data regarding the incident, no court decisions. Blaž Kraljević and his entire escort consisting of 8 men were killed in the conflict. The entire HOS HQ was struck with panic. Since I was a commander of the 1st HOS battalion, which essentially represented a core of the HOS army throughout the period from April to August; and since it was considered the best military formation within the HOS army at the time, everybody insisted that I return to the HQ in Ljubuški. I did not run away from my responsibilities because I knew what might happen after Kraljević and his escort were killed. I arrived to Ljubuški on August 10. Some friends came to pick me up at the Split hospital. People from Zagreb came on August 11. General Prkačin also came to calm down the situation. As soon as I arrived to Ljubuški I called general Praljak and arranged a meeting with him. I think we met that same night or the following morning and looked for a mutual solution to that crisis. The situation was really ugly and tense. A psychotic situation was created as if the war would break out between HVO and HOS the following day. I believe that it was somebody's objective – to make Croats divide and kill each other. I together with general Praljak exerted all efforts to calm down the situation and prevent the conflict. Bearing in mind the objective, we held several meetings with the highest HVO officials until the final decision was reached and that was to unite both military formations into a single army. General Praljak did a lot in that respect and created atmosphere for talks. There were many hot headed HVO officials as well as politicians like Mate Boban, who insisted on some strange solutions. He wanted HOS gone in one or two days: “I want HOS gone tomorrow!” He insisted that HOS units be integrated into HVO immediately. General Praljak did a lot of good things then. I did a lot on my behalf. We insisted that entire integration be carried out as a part of the process. There were many decent guys wearing HOS insignias that had been through hell during the war and were not ready to be treated in such a way. They were not ready at any cost for somebody to come and order them: „From this day on, you are not allowed to wear the HOS uniform and the HOS insignia any more!“. We agreed that the entire situation be solved through a process in which the experienced and well trained HOS members from Ljubuški would come under command of the HVO in Ljubuški, as well as well trained HOS

members in Čapljina would come under HVO command in Čapljina. In Čapljina we functioned like that from the very beginning. Almost all well organised HOS units which fought in the battles functioned like that. Also, there were some well organised and trained HOS units that hadn't seen the war until that moment. There were also many men at the Ljubuški HQ who wore the HOS uniform with entirely different objective in mind and for different motives. I believe that the highest Sarajevo officials had already established connections with the late general Kraljević and that someone wished to take advantage of him and the HOS units. He did not understand well some things in BiH. I personally warned him about those things: Well he..

What do you mean when you say that he did not understand some things?

General Kraljević emigrated when he was 19 years old from Lisice, a village in the vicinity of Ljubuški. He left Ljubuški and joined emigration community and became a well known emigrant. Kraljević opposed the former Yugoslav regime and fought against it in a democratic way in Australia. He spent 27 years of his life in Australia. He left somewhere in 1965. Since then the things have greatly changed. He was mostly engaged into politics, he studied Croatian politics from the era of king Tomislav to the recent Franjo Tuđman and the creation of the new Croatian state. He furthermore studied topics related to creation and destruction of NDH (Independent State of Croatia) as well as of Yugoslavia. After 27 years Blaž believed exclusively in Muslim and Croat joint fight against aggressors in BiH. In the beginning I also believed in that. That was the only possible way to confront the JNA aggressors at the time. We and Muslims together. We did it in the beginning and the entire thing functioned in the terrain. In Čapljina we never had any problems between Muslims and Croats, or HOS-HVO as far as I remember, especially in the period from April until July. At least I don't know of any. I don't know whether general remembers any problems. There were some individual incidents but they were not based on ethnic background (Croats-Muslims or HVO-HOS). There was no time for that. The war was on and we were 24 hours in the state of emergency. Well I meant to say that general Kraljević arrived with entirely different political perspective regarding BiH and vision of creating a joint army. I as well believed in that vision and I still believe that the alliance of Croats and Muslims was well done and correct decision at the moment of the JNA aggression in BiH in 1992. I believed that in those times we should have fought together. However, after 1993 and 1994 and the conflict with the Muslims, I honestly tell you that I do not believe in that vision any

longer. My own experience confirms it. Today I am a member of federal parliament in Sarajevo. Unfortunately there is no chance of some honest cooperation between Croats and Muslims in Sarajevo. The conflict during the war contributed to the current situation. It couldn't have been avoided. In 1992 we defended ourselves against JNA aggressors with Muslims, and we were ready to defend ourselves with anybody else. We were a very young nation and we were ready to defend ourselves by any means possible. Without turning this into some philosophical discussion I wish to say only one more sentence about it. The Muslims felt that they could take advantage of the situation and profit from it and that caused the war between the Muslims and the Croats. In that respect, I wish to emphasise the entire matter again, somebody wanted to take advantage of the HOS and late Blaž Kraljević and his vision. He refused any alternative vision except the joint one with the Muslims. He disregarded all possible consequences. I believe that somebody took advantage of him and it all resulted in the conflict between the Muslims and the Croats. I am highly disappointed in some local authorities here in Herzegovina because they have failed to investigate Kraljević's murder. Nothing is as yet known about the circumstances in which they were killed or about the perpetrators. I believe that the investigation should have been conducted a long time ago, out of piety towards other victims as well, out of piety towards 8 innocent guys in Kraljević's escort. I do not think that Kraljević was guilty of anything and it is my opinion that he didn't deserve to be punished the way he was. But it happened and let me go back to that situation again at the beginning of August (10th or 11th of August). It was of the utmost importance to calm down the tensions and prevent some individuals to retaliate, to seek revenge. It was difficult to stop relatives, brothers and friends of men who escorted Blaž Kraljević from taking revenge. There were entire groups of soldiers ready to revenge their deaths. We barely managed to calm them down and prevent further conflicts. The murder was committed and it was impossible to do anything about it at the moment. We knew for sure that there was somebody behind it, that it did not happen by accident. We also knew that the culprit was safe. The only thing that could have happened was more bloodshed among us. I have to mention general Praljak here again. I believe that he and some other individuals played very positive role in calming down tensions and preventing possible conflicts among people throughout these first few days while funerals were being organised. Finally a decision was reached on implementation of the process of integration of the HOS and the HVO units through several phases which lasted until March 1, 1993.

Let us go back a bit and talk about July 1992. In July 1992 there were several meetings held

between late Blaž Kraljević and general Praljak?

Yes.

You told me that you helped organised the meetings. Were you present there?

Meetings were held even before July. Blaž came to visit us on the front line, and general Praljak was also around and that is how they met. They would often meet at J&B HQ. Often, Blaž's deputy commander Ivica Primorac would come to these meetings. I cannot remember anything of interest. Those were regular meetings.

How did those meetings go? In what tone were they held? What was the atmosphere like?

When they talked about politics voices were raised. They had different political opinions. However, regarding military issues they had never had any serious quarrels. As I already told you after July 1, my team was ordered to leave Čapljina and we were deployed on other fronts. According to my opinion there were too many people with bad intentions who wanted to take advantage of the HOS and use it for their own political gain.

When you say people with bad intentions you mean the Muslims?

Yes, in that period the Muslims.

They advocated pro-Muslim...

Yes.

Extremely radical stream? Is that what you are referring to?

Yes, that's what I am talking about. The time was ripe for them to take advantage of the HOS units. The HOS was rather popular in Čapljina at the time. After our departure from Čapljina, the HOS

turned into something completely different with a different objective. Some new kind of people was created and I learnt later that the relationship with general Praljak seriously deteriorated. They became a sort of burden for the general in Čapljina, burden in a sense that those who caused trouble in the HVO simply left and joined the HOS. Some unusual individuals driven away by Serbs and JNA came from a wider area of Mostar and Gacka. Some strange faces started to appear in the municipality of Čapljina. Čapljina was at the time a refuge for all those who fled Nevesinje and Trebinje. Mostly it was a refuge for Muslims and some Croats. Some arrived to Mostar and some to Čapljina. In that chaos it was impossible to keep things under control. Perhaps they were instructed by politicians to join the HOS, maybe the HOS was closer to them politically. Already there existed various political visions of BiH. The HOS became a burden for general Praljak because some strange people appeared there and HOS turned into shelter for all kinds of people. It was important for the commander of that region to have as many detailed information and data as possible in order to be able to issue correct orders. Various Muslim commanders - former JNA officers who were members of counter-intelligence, as we learnt later, came to Čapljina and joined the HOS under a perfect alibi. General Praljak lost jurisdiction over that and parallel chain of command was established. They simply refused to cooperate. That all happened after July 1st. It all happened throughout the period between July 1st and date of Kraljević's death. I know of several meetings that took place with Blaž Kraljević but I was not present there.

Who was present?

General Praljak and Blaž Kraljević. General Praljak asked Kraljević to put things under control, to find out who were the people who had been joining the HOS. Čapljina was half destroyed and situated in the war zone. The chief commander had to have a complete control otherwise things might have turned into chaos. Blaž was hard to negotiate with, self-confident and stubborn. He was convinced that he was doing the right thing. So at that moment Praljak was unable to solve the problem. I was wounded around that time and several guys were captured alive in Popovo polje. I left the hospital because the situation in Ljubuški was chaotic. In Stolac, one HOS unit was formed consisting of 90% Muslims. Upon my arrival to Ljubuški, I was appointed to the position of the late Blaž Kraljević and nominated the chief commander of HOS for Herzegovina. The HOS unit from Stolac decided to take justice in their own hand and insisted on going to the place where Blaž

Kraljević was killed in order to settle the score with somebody. All that was happening at the very moment when general Praljak was putting all the efforts in calming down the situation. Due to my friendship with Praljak, I used my authority and sent the HOS military police to stop the Stolac unit from going to the place of the crime.

Where was the unit stopped?

In Čapljina. They were stopped on the bridge in Gabela. The main bridge in Čapljina was mined and demolished at the beginning of the war. After crossing the river Neretva the old bridge towards Dretelj was renovated and the old railroad bridge in Gabela was improvised in one direction. The old bridge was practically the only connection over the river Neretva with the other side besides the neighbouring bridge in the Republic of Croatia.

Was it tense at the bridge?

The MP commander first warned them to stop and retreat, when they did not want to return, he fired several shots above them. However, I was informed that a Muslim commander of the Stolac unit had been shot in the incident. They grasp the seriousness of the situation and returned back to Stolac.

What were the consequences?

He ended at the hospital but fortunately he did not die. We interrogated the MP commander and he explained that he had to use force because the man attacked him. Fortunately for him, the man stayed alive. Thanks God, that commander is still alive today.

How did that incident influence further relationship?

From that moment on I mistrusted the Stolac unit because of its structure and because they had disobeyed the direct order. Instead of staying put in their HQ in Stolac they caused another incident. I did not trust them and that unit never obeyed the order regarding integration into the HVO. Most of them left the army or said that they did not want to. Most of the units underwent transformation from

HOS into HVO in an organised manner. The unit in Stolac did not do it. They were committed to fundamentalist goals. They did not believe in political ideals of HOS or HSP (Croatian Party of Rights) which was to keep Bosnia whole. At that moment we recognised the Serbs as aggressors and true enemy and wanted to fight them off together with the Muslims with an intention to secure conditions for establishment of some kind of new political system for the state later on. Of course we wanted to include the Serbs who accepted BiH as their state because BiH had a large Serb population. Contrary to the then aggressors and their mentors we thought that life with the Serbs was possible in BiH. However the Stolac unit did not share our thinking and it had an entirely different idea in their mind and wished to take advantage of HOS.

When did it become clear that gap between the Croats and the Muslims widened? In which period? It did not happen over night? When did it become clear?

I believe that the beginning of general mobilisation was a first sign although it was not that obvious. Their boycott of mobilisation at the beginning of the war was in fact an expression of their political attitude. I did not understand it at the beginning. Even general Praljak cautioned me about that. For instance, Croats from the war stricken areas, from the villages and towns under direct attack came to us and said: „Here we are, give us weapons!“. At the beginning of war we did not have enough arms. The Muslims on the other hand simply vanished. A small number of them came to the HOS or the HVO's aid. I even remember some articles in the media saying how Muslims boycotted mobilisation. The then president of BiH Alija Izetbegović claimed that the war had nothing to do with them (probably having in mind his own people), Muslims in BiH. They accepted it and felt that it was not their war. I do not know what they counted on. However, the Serb aggressors and Chetniks didn't care whether you are Croat or Muslim, they did not spare anyone, they destroyed everybody who crossed their path. Even later on, when Muslims were directly threatened, they responded to a lesser degree. They felt the chance to gain as a nation in some political sense. They did not have any status as a nation at that moment. It was obvious that they wanted to be their own bosses. They refused any organisational help from HVO, and especially later on after the conflict with HOS. The beginning of the disintegration started with the murder of Blaž Kraljević. It was a signal for the Muslims to separate and openly confront the Croats. The open conflict started in Vakuf in 1993 somewhere in January. There were some individual incidents in Stolac, Mostar and Vakuf throughout

1992. Tensions between the Muslims and the Croats increased steadily throughout 1992. It seemed that the conflict came out of nowhere, but it was not like that. It had very deep roots. However as I said their general boycott of the mobilisation showed that there was something wrong.

Did you contact general Praljak in the period when those individual incidents happened which sort of announced further developments in that respect, were you somewhere close to general Praljak?

Well, after situation in Ljubuški, after the murder of Blaž Kraljević, we exerted great efforts to prevent an escalation of the conflict between the HOS and the HVO. A large number of HOS members were not able to get over the fact that somebody killed Blaž Kraljević and eight of his men. They could not accept it just like that. It was impossible to find out who did it. There were all kinds of rumours going on. People gossiped, murmured and talked about the murder. In any case I am certain that general Praljak had nothing to do with it. I know that very well. He was one of those who did the most to calm down the situation and prevent further conflict escalation. Additional enquiry into the matter and endeavours to seek justice could have only caused more trouble and confrontation. I and my associates at the HOS HQ were also aware of that. Thank God that there were enough normal people, people with common sense. Among those I primarily include general Praljak on the HVO side. Maybe it sounds a bit crude when I express myself like that, however at that time it was like that, you were on one or the other side. I was constantly in contact with general Praljak throughout the period of two to three months while the process of transformation of HOS into HVO lasted. Upon termination of that process, the units of HOS left for Bosanski Brod. I was ordered to go to Bosanski Brod with some 3-4 companies with 300 well-organised men to defend it. Bosanski Brod was in a very bad position. The Republic of Croatia was not allowed to interfere. General Praljak participated in those agreements. We stayed there a few days prior to the fall of Bosanski Brod. We left Ljubuški on September 9, and stayed in Bosanski Brod until October 4-5. Brod fell somewhere in middle of October. The transformation of both armies continued and I kept contacts with general Praljak on regular basis. However, I lost my best friend in Bosanski Brod, my deputy commander Krešimir Pavičić. General knew him well. He was my companion throughout the entire war. When I took the army to Bosanski Brod I was still in a cast and had fixtures on my arm. One day I was supposed to go on a patrol and Krešimir did not allow me to go. He told me: „It is not you who will go on a patrol

there“. He did not allow me to go, and went instead of me and got killed. He went there and got killed. I believed that he was killed instead of me and was awfully disappointed when we couldn't get him out of Bosanski Brod. He was left in the hands of Chetniks. Panic was reigning in Brod at the time and we suffered enormous casualties. The entire military system fell, the soldiers were worn down and their morale was low. I went to the joint HQ and asked them to find replacement for my company and informed that that we were leaving for Herzegovina. I needed a time off, to recover physically and psychologically. I was sent for medical treatment and given a leave of absence.

That means the end of 1992?

Yes, since my return from Bosanski Brod, somewhere in middle of October. They even called me back to the Croatian Army (HV), general Praljak also called me and told me. „Come here!“. I was psychologically worn-out and needed a longer rest. I stayed in contact with general Praljak on private basis until the beginning of 1993.

How long did that last?

Month and a half. In March 1993, there were some sporadic local incidents between the Muslims and the Croats. I think a real conflict started on May 9, 1993. I was not professionally involved in combat as yet although I felt better physically and psychologically. All units left. I did not. I felt rested and joined one of our units, called Radiško-probojska company in Mostar. Mostar was on fire, and the major outbreak of the conflict between Croats and Muslims started. Later on I stayed for a short time, some month and a half, at the administrative office of the military police in Ljubuški. During festivities of the June Dawns (which celebrate the liberation of the river Neretva - they are still celebrated today) I met general Praljak and Valentin Čorić and they all told me: „Common, join us, be with us“ and I accepted to stay with the military police unit in Ljubuški. I met general Praljak again after a very strange situation took place in Ljubuški. The internal conflict among individuals of the 4th HVO brigade occurred. The municipalities of Čitluk, Grude and Ljubuški had previously formed a joint infantry brigade. Perhaps it was one of the largest brigades within the HVO. However, disagreements and confrontations caused by local patriotism and different political opinions resulted in division of the brigade. The municipalities of Čitluk and Grude formed their own brigades and the

structure of command changed. Politics interfered and there was a fight between different lobbies related to appointment of a commander in chief. After conversation with general Praljak I took over the command of 4th HVO Ljubuški brigade and was engaged in forming defence lines of Gornji Vakuf, part of Bokševica and part of Mostar, Bijelo Polje together with general Praljak.

Dictaphone is switched on. I kindly ask you to introduce yourself at the beginning of these recordings, tell me your name, surname, date and place of birth.

My name is Stanko Primorac, called Čane. I was born on January 15, 1969 in Ljubuški. I will talk about a period when I served as brigade commanding officer on the front line in Uskoplje under general Praljak's command. I refer to the middle of August 1993. The Ljubuški brigade was assigned an area of responsibility around Uskoplje front line, near Vakuf. While we stayed in that area of responsibility many people were wounded and killed and we defended ourselves many times from the Muslim that is the ABiH attacks. The front line included Mostar, Čapljina, Stolac, north Sarajevo to central Bosnia. The greatest conflicts took place in August, September and October. 3-4% of Muslims, around 1500 Muslims lived in Ljubuški at the time. Although no one put pressure on them to leave, unpleasant atmosphere was created and incidents happened. On several occasions groups of armed soldiers entered a small village of Gracka near Ljubuški populated by 100% Muslim population overnight and harassed the villagers in various ways. They threatened and intimidated them, looking for money and other things. The villagers came to the headquarters and municipal office and complained about it saying that the soldiers belonged to the HV. We never discovered the perpetrators. Luckily no murder was committed. Most probably these incidents were committed by a few individuals or organised groups of armed men seeking material gain. I regularly informed general Praljak about the incidents at the military briefings in spite of the fact that the 4th HVO brigade did not have any responsibility over those incidents. There also existed military and civil police units together with all other civilian authorities such as municipal and court authorities. Unfortunately people were able to seek help only from the army HQ and the brigade. The situation wasn't as chaotic as in 1992, but general mobilisation was still in force, the conflict with the Muslims was on, specifically to correct myself, the conflict with ABiH, not Muslim people. Ljubuški was an example that it was not the conflict with the Muslims. There were only a few sporadic incidents which the army wasn't able to prevent. I remember well that I reported the Gracka incident at the

briefing. Since the brigade was formed by three infantry battalions, some headquarters companies, and one home defence regiment formed of elderly men and men of poor health. Their task was to perform certain duties in the municipality of Ljubuški such as guarding and protecting key premises such as Ljubuški health centre, bridges and roads. The general ordered that the home guard battalion be deployed around the village of Gracka in order to protect the village. In other words, he ordered us to simply deploy our units on certain points and prevent illegal raids of the village by men for whom the villagers claimed belonged to the HVO army. They assumed that the men belonged to HVO because they heard call one another by their names and nicknames. We never caught that group of men. Military and civil police failed to catch them as well. According to the order issued by general Praljak we erected a blockade on a nearby village road coming from the direction of Čitluk from which allegedly those groups came. I do not wish to accuse anyone from Čitluk municipality but we put the members of home-guard battalion on guard there. These guards were visited by military police from time to time. We did everything we could in order to protect people who were unarmed and harmless. Relationships between the Muslim and the Croat civilian authorities and representatives of political organisations in Ljubuški at the time were good. There were no political conflicts between them. General Praljak, as a man and a soldier, did the best he could in such a situation. We executed his order, and offered maximum protection to the villagers. The Muslim population in Ljubuški was not persecuted in any way at all. All those who wished to leave the brigade or leave the Ljubuški municipality for a shorter or longer period of time were allowed to do so. Nobody was evicted, or forcibly driven away from his flat or house.

I have a few short questions regarding the intervention. Did Praljak order the engineers to solve that, to erect a blockade?

Yes. The engineer company, which was a part of our 4th Brigade, erected a barricade by a mechanical shovel. An access to the village from the north was disabled. That was the only part which we could not control. The village could not be reached by vehicles any more. On the other side we put guards at the control points and they kept records of each person entering the village. We did not receive any new complaints regarding entrance of unknown people into the village since the blockade had been erected. In that way, we managed to protect the villagers to some extent.

Did the new measures bring any results? Did raids of the village and harassment by unknown persons continue?

I think that after the erection of the blockade there weren't reported any new incidents. After a while, due to political and other reasons, many Muslims left the municipality of Ljubuški on their own accord. They were given an opportunity to stay. Those who stayed were provided with as much protection as possible at the time. There were some individual incidents reported but they were not based on ethnic grounds. It could not be said that incidents in Ljubuški were based on ethnic grounds. If we compare data on number of incidents involving confrontations and murders in public places and bars between Muslims and Croats or Croats and Croats we would see that there were less incidents involving Muslims and Croats than Croats and Croats. I have to mention two incidents which occurred in Ljubuški in 1993 or maybe at the beginning of 1994. An elderly Muslim woman was killed by a hand grenade in her own yard. The bomb was thrown into her yard by a group of people. Although there was no intention of killing the woman, the woman was killed. I think that the investigation was conducted by the authorities and perpetrators were discovered. I know for sure that they were not from Ljubuški. The Ministry of the Interior conducted the investigation and found out exactly who, how and why had been involved in the incident. It was not premeditated or based on ethnic grounds. Maybe it would have happened even if it had not been for the conflict between ABiH and HVO. I know of another incident involving a knife. The man was convicted and I think that he served a 10 years prison sentence. It cannot be said that there existed organised persecutions or expulsions of Muslims based on their ethnicity in Ljubuški.

Just one more question regarding the matter. You told me that Praljak had to deal with all kinds of problems?

That's right.

What does that mean exactly? Does that mean that at some level local institutions and authorities which should have performed their duties failed to do so? Did they exist at all? Why did all these various and wide-ranging problems come to Praljak?

Well, unfortunately the banal problems often ended at brigade HQ or main HQ led by general Praljak. Those problems should have been dealt with by courts, civil police or military police or even by some lower authorities. The problems came often and it could be said that some civil authorities failed to do their job. Courts failed to do their job while civil police was prevented from doing their job. Such climate was created by the war. The army represented the only real authority and problems often ended at the brigade or at the main HQ and general Praljak. It is my opinion that civil authorities, police and military police were not capable of performing their tasks. The commander on the terrain had to deal and worry about all kinds of banal problems including boundary to domestic issues.

We are on again and I kindly ask you to introduce yourself at the beginning of these recordings.

I am Stanko Primorac Čane, born in Ljubuški on January 15, 1969. I will speak about the period from July 19, 1993 until _____ 1994 when I served as a commander of 4th HVO Brigade in the town of Ljubuški under general Praljak's jurisdiction. Throughout the month of July our brigade covered the area of responsibility bordering with south Croatia. The line spread from Popovo polje, Čavaš, Drenovac to Stolac. We executed all the HQ orders regarding the defence against the JNA and Chetniks. At the end of July we were sent as reinforcements to the Vakuf area of responsibility covering the Uskoplje front line due to the frequent attacks of the Muslims and very difficult situation in that part of the battleground. Also the conflict between the ABiH and the HVO had already flared up. We were sent there to help defend the Croatian villages in the area of the Vakuf municipality, Uskoplje. We had a battalion consisting of three companies at our disposal and took over the position on Crni vrh, one part of the town of Vakuf, and part of the village called Ploča, as far as I remember. I think it is a village situated on the outskirts of Uskoplje in the direction of Bugojno. After repeated attacks against the villages of Ploča, Crni vrh, Ždrimce and Dobrošin in the vicinity of Vakuf near Uskoplje we came and took over that area of responsibility. Mainly we were actively engaged in defence of the area from both individual and organised attacks by the ABiH. We covered several positions such as the villages of Dobrošin, Ždrimce and some other villages, I can't remember their names. Our forces were inferior to the ABiH forces. It is important to mention that the ABiH carried out repeated commando raids and daily artillery attacks against exclusively

Croatian villages. My duty was to inform general Praljak about the situation on the field. We arrived to Vakuf on August 8, 1993 and found general Praljak in a very difficult and ugly situation. Bugojno fell two days earlier. Croat civilians and the HVO had evacuated towards Uskoplje and Pidriš, and only the bravest ones stayed to defend the last defence line until the reinforcements came. I found general Praljak visiting several times a day the first line of defence, helping and consolidating the defence against constant ABiH attacks. The ABiH corps at the Vakuf front line was much larger than HVO battalion. They outmanned and outgunned us. The enemy outnumbered us. They were more numerous and stronger than us. First few days in August I helped general Praljak consolidate the defence line, explain to soldiers how to dig the trenches more deeply etc. We absolutely obeyed and executed Praljak's orders related to the defence against members of the ABiH. Crni vrh and Makljen were practically our last defence lines, Pidriš, Repetiror, Ciganske livade and the western part of the town of Vakuf, Uskoplje were the last defence lines of the area above Prozor, above Rama. If Crni vrh and Makljen had fallen, Rama and Prozor would have fallen also. We would have sacrificed thousands and thousands of Croats. It is a well known fact how the members of the ABiH treated Croats when they captured Croatian villages during that period and at the end of 1993 . In August, while we were consolidating the defence line on Crni vrh and Makljen, the well-known atrocity was committed in the village of Uzdol which was situated alongside our defence line. During the attack I had a chance to hear how the HVO soldiers and civilians who were the victims of ABiH cried for help when the ABiH soldiers entered the village. Uzdol was practically situated on the same defence line. It was approximately 10 km air distance from the last south east position towards Bokševica. They were in our area of responsibility and they even used mutual radio communication to call for help and I think that general Praljak responded by taking a group of HVO soldiers and going there, but it was already too late.

How many people were killed in Uzdol?

I think there were around 30 victims. It is very important to say that more than 20 victims were children, women and elderly people. Uzdol was not a strategic military target. The crime was committed for other purposes, to show us what kind of army we were dealing with and what were they prepared to do to us. There exist recordings and media writings related to the crime committed in Uzdol, there are surviving witnesses of the crime in Uzdol. There was no military force in Uzdol

which they had to defeat in order to achieve some military goal. Simply put, only elderly people and children lived there protected by a few men in uniform. I do not think that those men were even members of the HVO. Everything that was Croatian was a target for them at the moment and they openly showed it. A few witnesses survived. The same would have happened in Uskoplje and Ždrimci, but probably general Praljak will present the situation much better.

Just a moment, chronologically that happens after..?

That happens after Uzdol, when we were defending the valley, but I am sure that general Praljak will describe the situation much better. I will return to the fact that we defended three Croatian villages and were ourselves half-encircled. Women, children and elderly people lived in those villages. The villages of Ždrimci and Dobrošin didn't represent any kind of military target to ABiH. They were easy prey. We had a very difficult time in establishing defence of those villages and people living there. We simply arrived to the area of responsibility and became actively involved in defence. The area was called south-east zone then. Specifically the area was called south-east command zone under colonel Šiljeg who was general Praljak's subordinate. The last defence line was formed between Vakuf and Bugojno, Rama and Prozor. We practically defended the region of Rama and Prozor from Crni Vrh and Ždrimci.

The crime in Uzdol, you were on line.. the information about the crime spread very soon? What impact did Uzdol have on soldiers there? In the sense of morale, discipline and everything else?

Well, Uzdol was very...it broke our hearts to listen to those people. We were aware that it was out of our responsibility area and aware that no matter how hard we wished to help we just could not reach them on time, we could not arrive on time. Army morale was very high. At that moment, a single call by any of the commander in charge or by any commander with the authority would have been sufficient to motivate all the soldiers who were out of their bunkers to leave for Uzdol. Uzdol caused bitterness, and impulse for retaliation. Such incidents on both sides incited more violence. When you see a seven or eight year old girl killed or seventy or eighty year old men killed, you loose your mind, and that simply turns you into a machine, you think with your instincts and you realize that it is

impossible to control feelings or emotions.

How things developed on the terrain among soldiers after such incidents, I am referring here to Uzdol concretely? The army should behave as an army, it needs control or everything turns into chaos. What happened later?

Although such situations create an apparent atmosphere of good morale I think that it is only on the outside, in fact they have a negative impact on the army on the long run. We had an incident involving an attack of the enemy commandos in our zone of responsibility at the beginning of December. I must make a little digression...They attacked a bunker on Crni vrh and killed two soldiers. One man was shot and the other slaughtered. They literally slit the other man's throat. Most probably they surprised him and he did not have time to defend himself. After analysing evidence at the scene we found out that the bunker had been attacked by three commandos most probably. One guy was killed by firearms while the other guy's throat was cut and "Allahu Akbar" was written on the bunker in his blood. Such incidents incited anger and retaliation among their friends and comrades. And in the long run they demoralised the army. We also had trained commandos and scouts but we never sent them to attack the enemy bunkers and do such things. Our company was a home defence company consisting of all kinds of soldiers. Most of them were recruited into the army during general mobilisation. The company consisted of competent and less competent people. We executed our tasks and duties most seriously although we were exclusively involved in active defence. Every order issued by general Praljak's regarding our zone of responsibility in the course of six months was exclusively related to the active defence. My company had never been ordered to attack other people's territory. We were ordered to defend villages, inhabited mostly by Croats, which were under attack. Let me go back to what I was telling you. We defended two villages in the Uskoplje area. I am sure that some experts would explain better how illogical was to defend the villages of Dobrošin and Ždrimce, but we defended them anyhow during the entire course of the conflict between the ABiH and the HVO. It seemed impossible at the time. However, if we hadn't defended those villages they would have surely ended the same as Uzdol did. The expert military analysis will confirm that. The military or topographic maps will show how illogical the entire defence strategy was. The most logical thing would have been to evacuate all those people and withdraw the army from the area since the destiny of those people had already been predetermined. It

would have been the same as the destiny of the people from Uzdol. However, those people did not want to leave their homes, they wished to remain and live in their houses and villages. They were sure that they hadn't done anything wrong and hadn't caused any harm to anyone. They wanted to stay. That is why we came to the Uskoplje front line, to help those people who were attacked by the ABiH.

What happened to the discipline and order among soldiers, what happened regarding chain of command? What was the main problem which Praljak had to face?

Although the army was organised to a certain extent at the time, the very wide front line and the area of responsibility, which spread from Radoški kamen, from Serb Krajina, and I am maybe not the most competent to talk about it, must have provided a ton of problems for the general

As far as you know, what was the main topic at briefings?

The permanent problem was a constant shortage of soldiers at the time. General Praljak continuously had to deal with the problems related to the shortage of men; there was a need for the entire company at some position on the front line, or a platoon or at least ten soldiers. The soldiers were constantly relocated, transported or moved from one position to another etc. Such problems did not exist in some well organised and already formed army. Things had to be improvised because of daily attacks by Mujahedins or enemy commandos who broke defence lines at some positions and reinforcements had to be sent and interventions made. The front line was wide. We had two enemies on one side of the front line, and the third enemy across the line on Radoški kamen. That was the army of Republika Srpska or Krajina as it was called then. We had to deal with the attacks from Kupres area, constant attacks by Mujahedins from Bugojno areas and wider, and constant pressure against the villages in the valley, street battles in the narrow streets of towns of Uskoplje and Vakuf. We had to improvise constantly. A large number of civilians represented a kind of burden for the commanding officer. Those were all elderly people, honest people who did not wish to leave their homes not even at the price of their own lives. A large number of civilians slept on the front line where there was constant shooting. Simply put, regardless of the fact whether it was a brigade commander or a general of the entire area of responsibility, he had to deal with all kinds of problems which had nothing to do with

the war. I remember all kinds of improvisations made by general Praljak, his daily visits to the front line, where he constantly warned soldiers about the need to reinforce and dig trenches more deeply and where he pointed at the various danger situations for soldiers on the front line mostly related to the commando terrorist attacks. Our brigade and all other companies were directly threatened by commando attacks by terrorist units. I would call them terrorists and not anti-terrorist units as they are usually called. Mainly the terrorist units entered Croatian villages and attacked the HVO reserve army and did similar things to the ones I already mentioned on Crni vrh, between Crni vrh and Makljen. I shall tell you about the arrival of the 4th HVO brigade to the villages of Prozor and Rama. The panic reigned after withdrawal of the HVO soldiers from the Croatian villages from the wider area of Vakuf, Uskoplje and Bugojno. It was a stampede, panicky running of hundreds of civilians and soldiers. The fear spread among people and they were running because they were afraid. Masked enemy soldiers of ABiH had already entered their houses, intimidated or killed people. Panic spread and couldn't be stopped.

We are speaking about Crni vrh, about what time? Which date was that approximately?

As far as I remember, the end of July. July 30 that is August 1, 1993.

Which towns or villages were abandoned, which positions?

The village of Ploča was abandoned. Ploča is situated on the road from the direction of Vakuf towards Bugojno. Some people left the villages of Ždrimce and Dobrošin however a majority stayed and decided to defend their villages. They did not panic. However, people were running in panic from the village of Ploča and outskirts of Uskoplje, that is west side of Uskoplje in direction of Bugojno. There were even some people on horse carts fleeing from the nearby hamlets.

Army or civilians?

Army, civilians, everybody. The panic reached its peak at dawn, according to the intelligence reports, on July 30 when the ABiH attacked the Croatian villages in that area. August 1. In such situations, and most army experts will agree with me, when that sort of panic and stampede starts, there are no

mechanisms that would be able to put a stop to that. Civilians represent a great burden for commanding officers in their respective area of responsibility. We simply couldn't find ways to evacuate those people, force them to leave the war zone in spite of the repeated shelling and shooting. They were under constant threats of snipers and grenades. It is much better to have fewer civilians as possible in the war stricken areas. Civilians such as elderly people, women and children panic easily and much faster than army. They mostly end up running in panic. I know of a man who returned together with our unit to the village of Ploča after he had burnt his own house and barn and had killed his own cattle a day earlier.

Why did that man decide to burn his house down and kill his cattle?

A desperate man's move. The man regretted the entire thing later on. I saw how sorry he was regardless of the fact that he did not know whether he would be coming back the following day or after the war. That man, I cannot remember his name now, but I could locate the house which burnt down, was a member of HVO units. He saw on numerous occasions how the villages looked after the ABiH soldiers had passed through them. I think that was the reason why he wrongly decided to burn down his own house and barn and kill his own cattle.

Did he leave after that?

Yes, he left the house after that, believing that the village would fall and that ABiH would capture the village, since tens of Croatian villages had fallen a day earlier. Since he had already witnessed how the ABiH army behaved towards those who decided to stay and how they treated their property in the villages he said: "I would like to set it on fire myself, they would torch it anyhow!" In that situation, in that stampede and overall panic I remember very well what general Praljak did and the role he played...

When did general Praljak appear? We have a stampede of civilians, army, everybody running in confusion?

Taking into account the entire situation in those days, practically the entire front line was about to

collapse due to the major outbreak of the conflict between the ABiH and HVO. The general stayed in the operational zone of northwest Herzegovina aiming to consolidate the army by sending reinforcements. For example, our brigade received an order to send some of its units as reinforcements to the last line of defence of the Vakuf that is Uskoplje battle ground. Praljak's task was to coordinate and establish the last defence line in that part of the front line. If the villages of Vakuf, Makljen, Crni vrh, Pidriš and area to the left in direction of Radoški kamen had fallen, the entire area stretching towards the town of Tomislavgrad would have fallen as well and most probably the last line of defence would have moved to Vrana. He played the most important role in the entire affair that morning. In all that panic and stampede, somebody informed him about the situation on the front line. He was informed that the village of Ploča was about to fall, that half of the town was falling, that the army had already withdrawn from the area, that Mujahedins entered the houses, butchered, and killed. His task was to stop all these people from running. He stopped in front of the column of all those panicky people who were running down the mountain of Makljen.

He did it by himself?

Yes, general Praljak. He stood in front of the refugee column and some other army companies from Čitluk, Tomislavgrad and Livno. He climbed on top of the tank and turned to the people who were running down the mount Makljen and said: "People, whoever feels Croatian, whoever feels Ustasha, turn around, follow me, I will go before you, we will go back to the town, we will return to Vakuf, we will return to Ploča!" Only a few people believed him, most people thought that such a task was almost impossible in that kind of panic. However those who had already faced such situations knew that it was often possible to turn things in positive direction. The small number of people who immediately followed him and us who didn't know what had happened earlier went after him and took the positions on Pidriš. We deployed part of the army from Pidriš in the town and part in Ploča and on our way we witnessed many burnt houses which people themselves set on fire, because they did not want them to fall into enemy's hands.

Did the ABiH take the positions?

Some positions were already taken.

Were there any fights?

There were fights. I cannot recall the positions exactly because I do not know the area around Bugojno very well, specifically one part of Bugojno municipality, Vakuf or Crni vrh, but in any case the HVO members did not regain their old positions, but had to establish new positions in the areas where they encountered resistance by the ABiH soldiers. We formed new defence lines with the help of the residents who knew the area well. If it had not been for General Praljak, villages of Ploča and Ždrimci and all other surrounding Croatian villages in the vicinity of Uskoplje and Vakuf would have faced the same destiny as Uzdol.

Tell me one thing. You are the man who thinks on his own, forms his own opinions, and has sufficient military experience: what sort of a man it takes to do what Praljak did that morning and evening?

Well, the equal sign is often put between courage and insanity, but there is also a normal bravery. Often men brag about that kind of bravery, they brag that they possess normal kind of bravery. However, what Praljak did that morning was a crazy bravery, the one which borders with insanity. It is a willingness of one person to sacrifice himself. General Praljak, was a true commander in every sense of the word, quite different from many high ranking officers whom I had opportunity to meet.

Where does his strength lie? You say: “He was a commander” – has it anything to do with his position, rank or command authority? What kind of strength is needed in such moments?

No, his strength lies exclusively in his personality. The rank was of no importance. Often rank didn't mean much during the war. I can speak from my own experience. In most cases the strength lied in arguments and personality. We often talked in our last statement how a commander manages to become the authority among the soldiers of his unit. A commander achieves that by being first and last everywhere. The commander has to go first, before the soldier. I became authority among the soldiers after I had gone first to the front line as a scout, then I went first as a commander etc. I earned authority when my soldiers realized that I had much more responsibilities but equal duties. Specifically I permitted myself equal rights as they had. In above mentioned situation general Praljak

acted as ordinary soldier, an infantry soldier who showed, and not for the first time, superhuman strength. I can speak from my own experience, I cannot exactly define courage, but I can define courage as I experienced it. He, as a rational human being, was followed by a few brigade commanders with authorities, who were in turn followed by lower rank officers and then finally by common soldiers, and civilians. As a rational and clever man, he decided to do the only possible thing. Such scenes happen only in movies. What he did at that moment deserves praise. As a commander during the war I had many opportunities to meet other commanders from various operational zones and different headquarters. I know of many who had never had any experienced in the battle and who had never engaged in combat. General Praljak was something completely different. In that moment he proved it. For me courage is, I rarely give an honest reply to what courage is. Perhaps somebody will listen to these recordings one day. I was a commander of special forces unit with many responsibilities and duties. Special forces unit takes care of all those tasks which the regular army cannot or does not have time to do. The special forces unit deals with border line situations. The leader of special forces unit has an equal objective as general Praljak and that is to control his fear to a certain level. I was often afraid but I had to control my fear and panic because otherwise I would have triggered panic among lower rank commanders and soldiers and then there would be no end to it. Although I am not an actor, I often had to act and perform as the most brilliant actor. The commander does not have time to think. It is normal that every man feels fear in certain situations. A man who doesn't feel fear, either lies or is crazy. There exist people who do not fear anything, but these are psychiatric cases or are disabled in some other sense. Normal men show courage in their capability to control panic and fear in difficult moments during war. I often witnessed how general Praljak controlled his fear to the maximum and I learnt a lot from him in the course of war.

November 2005, Ljubuški