

NEDO PERIĆ

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pericn

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The interview was taken in Zagreb

Here it is. We are running and to begin with could you please introduce yourself. That is, name and surname, date and place of birth, residence and occupation.

I am Nedo Perić, I'm a pilot as a profession. 24.01.59., Stolac, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Nedo, could you please tell me, where were you during the war? What were you doing?

During the war period I had joined the defence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This means, in the defence in Čapljina, Stolac. Since, Stolac was my birthplace. I felt an obligation and I owed it to my parents, my brothers and all the other people who were included in the defence of that region, Croatian area in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Being a pilot as a profession, as soon as the helicopters came, somewhere towards the end of 1992, I put myself at their disposal as a professional for flying in HV (Croatian Army). And then I in HVO (Croatian Council for BiH Defence) carried out the duty as a pilot instructor for training young pilots. And introducing into action new helicopters that were purchased at the time ...

Could you talk a little louder, it's getting a bit noisy.

...purchased. Also with that in operation Maslenica. Later there showed a need in Bosnia and Herzegovina, actually then in the Croatian community of Herzeg-Bosnia, for introducing helicopters into action. They were unarmed helicopters for the help of civilians. That is, retrieving the sick and injured from enclaves in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is in all the areas where HVO were in power. I, as a Croat from Bosnia and Herzegovina, once again put myself at their disposal and as a volunteer joined the command of HVO.

Volunteered. That is what I owed to the people there. What I was doing at the beginning as a skilled professional pilot, training young people, people who were, some came from JNA, and some were from aero-clubs. We attempted to create a base that would help all the people from that area. It means, firstly the sick, injured because the health system collapsed. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of the flights that I made were made to take the sick and injured towards Croatia, which is Firula (hospital in Split).

What were your biggest problems you came across during that period, working as an instructor for pilots? How possible was it to do the training, what did you work on? Did you have any help?

Firstly and basically, the organization of HVO as an army then practically did not exist. There was no respect towards the subordination. It means there was a formation of various groups that were based on local, that is, family and other reasons. It was difficult to establish a system for training which would be logically and professionally supported by HVO. There general Praljak tried to help us as much as possible. But even he, in that chaos couldn't establish a subordination which would ensure one normal course for training and retraining. But, meanwhile, because it were the days of joy, pride and a fight for existence, we as professionals gave everything in our power to organize – as much as possible in those conditions, to train young pilots. I believe we performed a miracle. Now when I look back from this time distance, it is unbelievable that we could've achieved any success. Nevertheless, we succeeded and produced a ***, a base for development... a development of a small, because I wouldn't call it aeronautics of a group of enthusiasts who flew on Russian helicopters Mig-8 and saved everyone who needed it. We did not look at the religion, nationality and origin but rather, simply: we wanted to humanitarily help every person who found themselves in that situation.

Before you tell me a little about the flights and how did you go, where did you go, who did you pull out and how risky were those flights – I'm interested in only one thing; you say there were local sheriffs, were there those kind of problems on the field. How did that practically un-organisation that had then been present, reflect on you, your work, on what

you and your colleagues tried to achieve? Meaning, concretely.

Concretely, we had privileges being that we as pilots, that is helicopters, because everyone needed them then. Everyone had injured family, friends. So we had a specific status. Meaning, we were the ones that were flying. No one else flew. They put us aside and used us when they needed us. For that reason, we practically did not bother anybody or were in no conflict with any special groups. Since every group needed someone of theirs injured taken out, sick, brother, sister and the rest of them. There were risky situations. When one person is a leader of an informal group – how would you call them – out of ignorance they come to you, threaten us that we have to do that even though what they are asking for is difficult to do because of the conditions. I felt like they were putting a gun to my throat in Uskoplje, Rama. We simply couldn't fly because of the fog. But I understand those people. They don't know that. Those people probably saw a helicopter for the first time. And they thought we were almighty. And that we could do things in all kinds of situations. With the time going by, people came to realize that what we were doing was a righteous job and that we were giving everything from ourselves. I had received acknowledgement, apologizes from people who put a gun to my throat in those situations. We tried to understand everything. We simply had to survive and help others. Since no one else could do it apart from us.

How big was the group of people who wined those flights?

A group of people formed themselves at the beginning; there were four, five pilots and a few mechanics who had accepted at all to do the job. Reason being that at the beginning it was nonsense, from professional organizational sources. I'm an educated pilot, I finished the Aviation Academy. Judging by the postulate by which we were educated, it was impossible. But, owing to the perseverance of the people... We saw the suffering of those people, in Nova Bila, wounded, sick, in Rumboci, in the hospital. People dying. They were dying in our helicopter, around tenth of them. There were women giving birth in the helicopters. That was a fight to give people aide. From this distance, now, time, I believe we had done a miracle. We were acknowledged and even our American colleagues who were in

charge, Italians, in charge of controlling fly-zone in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And all our flights were never a secret because all our flights were recorded, announced, permitted. And all the documentation that exists on the flights of that small group of people from Posušje in Bosnia and Herzegovina were monitored and controlled by the International forces. In the contemporary world you can't make one flight secretly, everything is recorded. All igniting of engines was evidenced. So, around those flights, there are no secrets or unknown terms. It means we were helping everybody: Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, everybody who was in particular hospitals, who needed transport for further therapy in Croatia, that is, in Split and further yet Zagreb.

What period do you remember as the most frequent, as the time of most frequent flights? When did you most intensively fly in the sense of retrieving people, saving them, giving help?

We flew most intensively when the unhappy clash happened, that is the conflict between Muslims and Croats in the area of middle Bosnia, when they were in enclaves, and the only survival for enclaves was to bring them medical equipment, medicine. And while returning we were retrieving the injured and sick.

That was 1993?

In 1993 and everything in 1994, a good part and everything up to the Washington Agreement. We weren't retrieving the sick. We were also taking doctors and volunteers to Nova Bila, Ruboke. It means, also specialists who put their head in the bag. Every flight was equal a death sentence. And they were helping over there. They were also deciding which people we were going to take. You just open the door. Who comes in, comes in. You close the door and go back.

In general those flights were at night?

Night.

And the conditions, what were the actual conditions like, where by right, you were not allowed to fly?

Don't fly. Yes. Night. It means, in impossible conditions... for that reason we

had to over there ****, because when we were landing in middle Bosnia, armed Muslim commands were waiting and firing on us.

From there was firing from the Muslim position?

Normally. Every flight was monitored. However, we went...

One more question; it seems your flights were easy to follow since you announced them. Is the firing on you connected with the announcement of your flight?

It was announced to the International forces...

Because you had to do it that way...

We had to announce them. E, now, I'm not sure... By moral and humanitarian rights the International Forces weren't allowed to give Muslims that information – in fact, in that area, our friends. They were covering the area, where we were landing, with mine throwers. It means, we were landing without lights, without anything. It means the place of landing was concealed. We were often changing the place of landing...

Why?

So they wouldn't discover us. They covered one place with mine throwers so that...

So it happened that the last place where you landed was covered by fire?

Mine throwers, yes. For example, at the beginning we were thinking of lighting a fire as marking our landing, and one night when we were landing, with 5000 meters we saw hundreds of fires. The Muslims had turned them on to mislead us into wrongly landing. So we went totally...

And what did you do in that concrete situation?

We returned because we assumed it could be a fix.

You mainly flew to, it means, where? Which places did you fly to most?

Well, the enclaves: Kiseljak, Busovača, Novi Travnik and Rumboci.

It means for clear technical, you went there with a team, you carried

medical supplies. You carried what was needed...

...was needed. That is so.

You transported medical teams. And in return?

Injured and sick we took towards Split, that is, took them to Posušje.

A moment ago you said you didn't make a difference: Croats, Muslims, whoever needed help, received it. Who decided who was going to get onto the helicopter and be transported in particular flights?

The people decided who were expecting us at the place of landing. The helicopter was never turned off. It means you open the door; we had five minutes to load and unload. It means, unloading the medicine and the rest. And the injured and sick were loaded. We didn't have anything to do with that. We couldn't leave the helicopters, never because there were always grenades from the enemies falling around us.

What is the estimate of people, the injured, sick, who were returning back, in one flight, in one helicopter?

That number varied. That one was in Japan for human rights. Then we had brought 54 children **** how did you call it, I've already forgotten. But mainly 20 were transported, sick, injured. Depending on the position they were in, in a lying position, sitting...

Did that match some kind of rules or standards?

No. Nothing matched the standards. Everything was done outside the standard.

Everything was done outside the standard? Means, overloaded?

Overloaded helicopters and...

The risk was increased?

All of that was a risk. Every flight was a risk.

Were you in a situation where you were shot, that the helicopter was shot?

Yes, a musketry bullet. For you don't know...

Musketry bullet, you don't count that as something serious?

That isn't counted. But you have to remember that the helicopter is a sounder. And when a bullet hits, small-bore, an explosion erupts, where we assume that

we've fallen apart. Its psychological fear that you don't see you're complete and not the helicopter. It's a sounder and it feels like a train hit you.

Was there any serious damages, were any colleagues shot?

Well, yes, helicopter.

Fine, they are shooting, but amongst those people in the helicopters could also be Muslims?

Of course, there were also Muslims. My colleague was a Muslim, he flew with me. Normally. Sejo, I believe it's evidenced, he flew normally with me in the helicopter because he saw it was humanitarian flight, that we are trying to get help to people and not... We were unarmed, they were transport helicopters. People who are in that field of work should know... Helicopters, they don't have ammunition, or equipment, or anything. It's simply an unarmed helicopter. It's a transport helicopter... humanitarian flights, transport of people and cargo.

Did you notify the shooting to the International Observers?

Yes. Everything was notified. Because we... with every loading there was an international representative present. We had our liaison officer allocated for us, who was some colonel, English; I've forgotten his name now, he always checked the cargo. Each time we returned he was waiting for us, made a list of the things we bought back and who we bought back. So that completely, all flights, everything was controlled by the International Community.

Tell me, please, your meetings with general Praljak at the time, did you meet with him and what were your meetings like?

Well yes, I cooperated with general Praljak at the time. Our meetings were like ordinate and subordinate. It means, I was a professional soldier and the relation between subordinates existed between us. General fought to introduce subordination, to form a pyramid, a command pyramid. But it didn't pass. There was just no way to implement it at the time, in that ****. Everyday we had over 20, 30 dead, family, relatives, also groups, everyone was putting pressure on him. He simply wanted to form an army. It means, to proceed by the law for human rights, Geneva Convention, to create an organized army. But that, at that time was

impossible. It was not in question be it Praljak – if it was, what I am saying, the Holy Father, at the time it was the crazy time of war between us, Serbs and Muslims, and everything, if the Holy Father came, I don't believe he could've established a subordination and government. There was no authority. He tried to do everything for his soldiers. Even us, he sent me personally on irrational missions such as to save only one soldier. We went and we were saving. For him every soldier was worth a hundred soldiers. In that sense we had great cooperation. He is also sensitive, especially towards the injured and sick.

Did you ever hear that general Praljak with such requests, in his wish to save people, in any way discriminated against anyone? Did he discriminate amongst the injured, amongst the civilians, amongst those who needed help?

That's nonsense, whoever says that. General Praljak was for every sick person and injured. He never asked who they are, what are they and where are they from. It means, for us, the command who was working never asked for the name and surname of the person they were saving. Nor was anyone thinking of that during that time. On a daily basis there was about 20, 30 people who we were retrieved. First of all we didn't know, not to mention, that Praljak couldn't have known, how, what religion, nationality. Everyone was saved who could've been saved in that situation. There was no difference made.

Did we forget to mention something?

No. If there is something, we can continue later.

Zagreb, January 2006.