

I, Zvonimir Skender, Major General of the Croatian Army (in retirement), and Lieutenant Colonel of the French Army (in retirement), born in Zagreb on 18 VII 1939 would like to use this official letter to set forth my experiences in line of command from the Croatian Army and the French Army.

Upon leaving Yugoslavia in 1958 I entered the French Army (The Foreign Legion) on 10 IV 1959. I spent four months in Algiers for military training. The training had been basic, including military skills, military behaviour according to the Geneva Conventions, especially responsibility of reporting in regard to superiors, in command line towards superiors above you. I had also learned that even in harsh discipline environment we are not obliged to execute orders which are not in accordance with the Geneva Convention on human rights.

Subsequently, I undertook a four months schooling to become a corporal. During that period a strong emphasis had been made on commanding small groups as well as on commanding the subordinates. We had to be very demanding towards those few subordinates, who were under our direct command within the meaning of military skills, monitoring of everything that was happening on the field, thoroughly reporting on ways of how a command was executed or not after it had been given. Being the creator of the commands issued I myself was a part of the execution of those commands, which enabled me to have a close insight into many aspects of the reporting process and the credibility of those reports made by my men. Collecting all that, I had to report to my superior, to sergeant, on all of that, often giving detailed reports on my men's moral and general state of mind. In line of command, I was responsible for my small group of men as well as for everything that they would do while fulfilling those commands. In case of a problem which I would not be able to resolve on my own, a solution would be found within our line of command, and it would always be found and it would never be covered up.

Subsequently, I undertook a four months schooling to become a sergeant, a non-commissioned officer, that is. In addition to expanding military skills, a very strong and important emphasis was given in the command line towards the subordinates, towards the section of men under direct command, issuing of credible commands as well as demanding credible reports being issued to me. On the other hand, we had to report in details to our superiors, the commanding officers that were outranking us in the command line. We were responsible for everything our men would do, but we also had the chance of having them in our power, so to speak.

As far as the responsibility of executing commands, behaviour as well as reporting to the command line is concerned, the smallest of mistakes or any kind of oblivion would be severely punished, often resulting in rank being stripped off. I had been a witness to such events in more than one occasion.

After the Algiers war I returned to France, with the unit, during the second half of 1962.

Without going into further details on my NCO career, I would just like to say that I had been educated, in many occasions, in French military schools, where I perfected not only my military skills, but proper and precise commanding of the subordinates as well as reporting to

the superiors. During that career, I had spent a few years in units in Africa, where we had more than one occasion to demonstrate our knowledge in effect.

In the meantime, I was given the French citizenship, and on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1974 I became a lieutenant. Here I had gained more commanding possibilities, but it also meant greater responsibility in that command line. This is how I was given the opportunity to command three different troops in a 5 yrs period of time.

I ended my military career in the French Army on 17 VII 1989 by retiring after thirty years of service.

Taking all that into consideration, I could come to an authentic conclusion based on my own experience in commanding the subordinates, thanking long-term and heterogeneous training as well as control that was always present in that line of command, that there had never been any odd commands, and taking into consideration the fact that I started off as a regular soldier and had climbed all the way up to becoming a colonel I was able to appreciate and comprehend the importance of reporting to the superiors, towards those above oneself.

Thanks to the training that everyone in all of the hierarchy had, it was impossible to hide anything, at least in the long run. Surely to honour the rules of the Geneva Conventions one must take utmost care of correct execution of the given commands on the field itself, since most of the actions that should never happen take place precisely there, and that is why that line of command is the most sensitive one; for example, when I was a sergeant, I remember one night we were on the field under fighting conditions, the command was to keep the line impenetrable without shooting for no good reason. Around 1 a.m. someone had shot a bullet in my sector. After a quick check made by the corporal with the soldier that had shot the bullet, we learned that the soldier had shot something that had been moving before him. For the time the corporal needed to rapidly check out the situation, my commanding officer had already inquired about the situation. As soon as I had received the report, I instantly reported to the platoon commander, who most likely reported to the troop commander.

What I wanted to say is that it was all out in the open air, known immediately what was going on out on the field, what, how, who and why, which then enabled the superiors to evaluate and, in case of need, do everything in their power, to commend or to punish the executor of those actions, exercising their authority or forwarding the issue on to a higher level of command and responsibility.

Being a born Croat and a retired officer of the French Army, observing what was going on in former Yugoslavia and especially the suffering and problems Croats were facing, bearing in mind my own military profession, I had decided to return to Croatia to help defend and create an independent Croatian state.

In summer of 1993, I went to Herzegovina where the Muslim-Croat conflict had been going on. From the very beginning I discovered huge problems concerning commanding on all levels. Those were group of civilians, armed, often in civilian clothes, with little military

discipline and big and brave hearts. These were groups aged 16 to 70 who took on defence tasks close to their homes. Their discipline and will to fight would decline easily when they would find themselves away from their homes. Up until December 1993 I was a sort of observer/co-ordinator within units, so that is how I was able to move across the entire front line of about 280 km from one Croatian border to another. That is how I was able to be around commands of units on a daily basis, on all levels, all the way to the last soldier on the front line. I have to admit that I was appalled realizing that there aren't many possibilities to command the subordinates. Commands issued were often distorted or poorly understood, so they would never reach the soldier. There was practically no one controlling the issued commands as well as what was being done and in what way. It was more than obvious that the command line was not functioning. Reporting to the superiors was even a worse issue. Nobody was reporting on anything, everything that would reach the top would be hearsay, so if one would want to know something, one would have to check it out personally by going to the field or the front lines, and that was obviously always too late, and even that wasn't always possible. I realized that due to the way of commanding and reporting the above mentioned groups of men would cope on the field the best way they could, which was favourable to the creation of minor bosses within every group whose men would answer solely to them, making these small groups highly hermetic.

In December of 1993, I was made Commander of the Operational Zone of Tomislavgrad. I had set my command spot in the City of Prozor. The conditions were so bad that I actually called that zone "the twilight zone". Almost every commander had a smaller group of men protecting them for their own safety, so I had done the same, always having two reliable men with me, who would never leave my sight. I can still remember, to this very day, few events, which I will describe in a couple of lines.

One day a problem broke out between men of different units, most likely due to alcohol, so one of those minor bosses got disarmed and someone took his gun. Shortly afterwards, he was told that it had been commanded by a commander of operational zone, namely me. He was a local, a violent boss; most likely under the influence of drugs, he came during lunch to a restaurant full of people. I was there and we had all been armed with personal fire weapons, so was he with a submachine gun which he started to reload and then he started shooting on the ceiling asking about whom and where is the commander. To avoid casualties, I got up and told him that I was the commander. He was furious, so he started shooting threatening to kill me. I hadn't known what all the fuss was about. He captured me instantly forgetting to disarm me, so I could have killed him at any time, but not knowing what it had been all about, I had decided to wait and see. He was a member of the Rama brigade, so he took me to their command, where he started shooting. At that point he realized that he forgot to disarm me, so he took away the gun I had on my waist. Then came a commander who had a lot of influence, and he calmed him down. I went back to my command, and he was taken aside someplace to calm down. At that point I was facing a problem – what do I do now. I examined the problem from every angle, thinking of what could be done and what should be done. If I imprison him, I will, most likely, cause additional problems within a unit that already had many. I would have probably lost some group of men, who wouldn't answer the call to go to the front line

and fight. Back then, every man was valuable, since there weren't many at the front lines anyhow. Taking all that into consideration, I decided to report him, but with a delay to the solution of the problem (waiting for more peaceful or better times to come). This was the first time I got captured, and by my own men, too.

The second time was far longer and equally dangerous. There was a fight in one café, between drunken people from Bugojno and Rama. Since everybody carried arms on them all the time, a man from Rama got killed. Comprehending rapidly the gravity of the case, I hid the suspect from Bugojno in custody; he was deputy of the Bugojno brigade. This fire started spreading rapidly. Part of the Rama brigade had left their positions and they came to Prozor where they surrounded and held in captivity the entire command. They were asking for the suspect to be surrendered to them, and that meant his certain death. I could not have allowed something like that, especially after finding out about part of the Bugojno brigade leaving their positions as well, which meant that there was a real possibility of a conflict between parts of those two brigades. Had something like that happened, we would have lost many positions, even entire zones perhaps. Such a thing could not have been allowed. I needed to gain on more time, so we started calming the situation down, and discussing what could be done. At the same time I invited one troop of military police to serve as back-up, and they came rather quickly and surrounded the Rama people around the command. We also called for a judge, certain politicians, and General Praljak who knew these people and had influence in these territories. No one was allowed to leave the command. It lasted for the whole night, and the tension had finally subsided. The Rama people were given guarantees that he would be tried in court by law. After 48 hrs it all settled down and things went back to how they were before. The suspect from Bugojno got sent to prison and was tried by law. Nobody was ever held accountable for all other acts. I must say that I was very pleased with how this situation got resolved, and by no means did I want to provoke any further and certain, huge incident by punishing those hooligans from the Rama brigade.

I wanted to demonstrate in these few lines the kind of problems a commander would encounter on a daily basis. The inability to properly command due to the non-existing or weak line of command to the subordinates, the inability to react properly and precisely due to non-existing line or reporting. There was a short period in time when there were attempts to discipline the soldiers, which always lead to losses in number of soldiers, since they would then, due to their friends getting punished, simply leave abroad for a while, or they wouldn't answer the call to do their shift on the front line. It is clear that the commanders had to adapt to various arrangements if they wanted to execute the most important of commands, to keep the front line. To me, being a long-term, experienced and trained officer, this way of commanding was highly arduous, but I had to adjust to conditions described since without doing so, we wouldn't have gotten around to do anything. Once you read about commanding and reacting in armies of the Western countries compared to this, then it becomes very obvious that it has nothing to do with what might be expected in Western views and standards.