

IVICA TOMIĆ

# **TOMIĆ IVICA**

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## IVICA TOMIĆ

**Here we are, the dictaphone is on. At the beginning of these recordings I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself. Please tell me your first and last name, date, place of birth, occupation and residence.**

I am Ivica Tomić, born 29th January 1964 in Ljubuški, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

Currently retired, I live in Ljubuški.

**You live in Ljubuški?**

Yes, I live in Ljubuski.

**Ivica, we have been preparing for this interview for a long time. Let's try to do what we have discussed and remember a bit the events related to the war time, the time that you actively engaged in. What were your duties in that period? Let us remember the encounters with Praljak at the time? We can start from the beginning. War events, where did they find you? What were you doing at the time?**

Well, war events. We can start by talking about the beginning of the war on the territory of former Yugoslavia and about the attack or aggression of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) on Slovenia which caught me in Ljubuški. Shortly after that, the JNA aggression turned against the Republic of Croatia. After that, a large number of young men from my town and surrounding area reported to the Ministry of the Interior and joined the Croatian National Guard in the Republic of Croatia in defence from the aggression of the JNA and Serb paramilitary units. At that moment I had a marital status already, I was married with a little child then but I simply decided that I would participate in defence against aggression on Croatian people and the non-Serb population on the territory of former Yugoslavia. It was obvious to me that the aggression had been prepared in advance and that it had already been underway in these areas. I became actively involved in the territorial defence (TO) municipal headquarters in Ljubuški in its early stages in preparation for upcoming war. I left for Omiš where I completed military training with an objective to gain some new knowledge that I could use and apply in defence of my town and the area in which I lived. I returned to Ljubuški afterwards and started working professionally at the Ljubuški municipal headquarters, specifically in the territorial defence HQ on issues related to education and other operational activities. After declaration of general mobilization in April 1992 I became a commander of municipal headquarters.

**In April, already?**

Yes, later I worked on restructuring of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade. I also performed other military tasks during the war, according to the orders which I had received. I think that I met general Praljak for the first time on April 11<sup>th</sup> 92 near the bridge on the embankments where I was positioned

with my troops in direction of Tasovčići. We were positioned facing the former Yugoslav army barracks which had been at that time in the hands of Yugoslav army.

**Just a small digression, let's try to clarify what was actually going on in the Čapljina at the time, what was the atmosphere like, what was the climate like in the surrounding area, what was important for Čapljina at the time?**

The most important thing in Čapljina was the army barracks. It was the only Yugoslav army barracks for BiH, besides the one in the western Mostar. It was the only barracks in the western BiH which served as a link, a connection between eastern bank of the river Neretva with the western part of Herzegovina in direction of Livno, Kupres and south of Croatia, Split, and so on. There had been some incidents provoked by the Yugoslav army probably with an objective to examine the area through which it would eventually move to Split and join the JNA forces that had already been stationed on Kupres. Tank and infantry units and ... These incidents involved people from the region standing physically on the road in front of tanks and other military vehicles and preventing them leaving the barracks and passing through, making clear their decision to stand against aggression. At any price. That's it.

Hmmm ... Čapljina itself had already been threatened by a breakthrough of the Yugoslav army forces and Serb reservists units from the direction of Montenegro and eastern Herzegovina through Stolac. They came all the way to the bank of the river Neretva and in some way broke the defence forces which had already existed in Čapljina by reducing their defence powers to a minimum. In such a situation, of course, we from Ljubuški tried to help and stop such the JNA advance. We tried to prevent the Serb and the Yugoslav army forces from merging with the army in Čapljina military barracks. In that first breakthrough we did not experience the open conflict but we only managed to occupy positions on the left bank of the river Neretva, simply waiting to see what would happen, ready to fight regardless of the strength ratio that was very unfavourable for us since we had no artillery or armoured units at our disposal.

**What did you use then?**

We used infantry arms. We collected the arms through personal purchase on the black market or by taking the arms from the Second World War out of the storages. Therefore, we can not speak of any organized or real army. We can not talk about organized armament supply. We cannot speak about good quality weapons, or of some organized purchase of ammunition. The arms were collected from various places and by all means possible. We were in a situation where we could not say that we were organized or had any clear plans. We didn't know what to expect or do in case we were attacked. We only knew that we were determined to defend ourselves. We didn't know how to organise ourselves on the terrain. We would have handled it somehow. Thus the situation was the following: you had soldiers who were not real soldiers

but both soldiers and civilians, in fact they were actually civilians who in a self-organized manner and on voluntary basis formed the military units and came to defend their houses, families and living areas. They were facing all their fears, uncertainties and lack of any prior experience with the war situations. That was the situation in which I first met general Praljak. He approached me in his uniform and he introduced himself. He was a striking person. He came to see what we were doing there and what could he do to help us etc.

**He approached you?**

Yes, he found me there on the embankments along the river. The soldiers were lined in rows in lying position. It was evening already. The soldiers had arrived a few moments earlier and taken the positions on their own accord. At that time the positions were not fortified or consolidated in any organized manner.

**He approached you then?**

He immediately noticed that our positions had not been fortified and said that we had to make our positions stronger because that was the only thing that could save our lives since we did not have adequate equipment or arms for stopping the enemy offensive. Also he turned to the soldiers and said: "Do not be afraid. There is nothing to fear? They are nothing special. Nobody will swim across the river Neretva at midnight" and so on...It raised people's spirits. However they were still afraid to raise their heads and look over at the other side. Then he walked to the end of the embankment, urinated, cleared his throat a bit and said: "You see, there is nothing there. We shall all do that...day after tomorrow.. Let them wait...the war will last."

**And you, where were you on that embankment? Also taking a leak?**

No, I was not. That was actually the first encounter with the man who I had never seen in my life before.

**What was it like to you? His attitude?**

He seemed to be sure of himself, certain of what he was saying. He acted in accordance with what he was saying. He thought us by power of personal example. In war each individual is revealed in his true light. All the features that outline one's character come to the surface and are much more evident than in normal, everyday life. It was evident that the man clearly knew what he wanted, what he believed in. He understood what was going on around him and in the least did not doubt his actions. That man was not a fake, he was not the man who would tell you one thing and then sit in his car and run off, leaving you to wonder whether the things he was telling you were true.

To tell you the truth, it was my first encounter with someone who would be my superior on the battle field. Until then I hadn't have a similar experience. It was something new to me. Yes.

Well but it did not surprise me.

**And how is that? It did not confuse you?**

No, it did not confuse me, except that I was glad that someone with an attitude showed up. I was glad that someone with a firm belief came and showed by his personal example that the war was not some sort of bogeyman and that you did not die from just any bullet.

**And others? How did they react? What did they comment when he left?**

People mostly keep to themselves when somebody new comes, they become withdrawn. At first they asked question such as these: “Who is this guy? Where did he come from? What does he want? Getting smart with us? Who is crazy to dig now?” I mean bunker, trench and so on ... “He tells us to dig and we ran away from home so we didn’t have to dig!” Those were the comments. Well my first encounter with that man and my first impression was that he knew what he wanted, that he stood behind his words and that he did not have fear. The man was brave and showed it by his personal example. I think that after that, some two, three or four days later we met again. I can’t remember exactly. I had a traffic accident in the meantime and my head was all in bandages. When he saw me he said: “For Christ’s sake, what happened to you?” Something like that, through some kind of laughter. I told him that I had had traffic accident. He said.” Well, from now on, while I am here, I will reduce speed limit to 60 out of town, and to 40 in town.”

**That was even more serious than in Zagreb.**

That’s right. He attempted to introduce rules and order from the very beginning. Those were not only military rules but basic rules of good behaviour. Through those rules he showed his own character, his own commanding capability. He also said the following: “When operating a vehicle, my commanders have to drive like gentlemen, and not speed down the road.” You see it was not merely a question of military discipline, but also a question of positive attitude, good personal character, and good organizational capabilities. It tells you something about a person and about the system that persons wants to impose.

**Thus, later you had contacts with him often?**

Yes, after that we met on a regular basis.

**In different circumstances?**

Yes, in various circumstances. But I could always feel that his ambition and his personal wish were to establish order and gentlemanly behaviour in every aspect of life as well as to teach soldiers how to show full personal responsibility for everything they did.

He felt responsibility towards the army he belonged to and showed understanding for his subordinates, for their fears and problems demanding at the same time that they also show strength and solid responsibility for each other. What would that mean? He asked each soldier

to feel responsible for the guy next to him. He told us that we did not come to wage war for some egotistical reason but that we came self-willingly with an aim to fright the aggression and achieve freedom which we had been dreaming about for decades.

**These are therefore your first memories of the encounters with Praljak?**

Yes, that's right.

**When we prepared this interview, I have a note here of you saying that the formation in which you served was one of the most organized formations within the army in the region? Is that right?**

Well, I suppose it could be said at that time. In April, and later in '92 the units under command of the Ljubuski municipal headquarters were better trained and ready for movement at any time and on short notice, regardless of weather conditions and time of day. On the other hand that was difficult to achieve with other units. We accomplished that because we previously had some time to prepare and organize units on territorial level, and later on even on exterritorial level. I speak in terms of the level of municipalities. In the beginning our units were first formed at local level, level of our villages and towns, and later we reformed those units turning them into larger units at municipal level. In early '92 year we managed to form a battalion with approximately 700-800 people under municipal HQ command. We also printed all the information regarding the formations within the battalion: squads, platoons, companies, infantry companies, and mortar and artillery batteries... We included everything we had at the time and everything which we could use to fulfil our units.

**How did you resolve the issue of mobilisation? Mobilisation was a problem at the time?**

Well look, I know that the registry of men was hidden in the beginning because of possible fear of confiscation by the Yugoslav army. Therefore the general mobilization was declared on 3<sup>rd</sup> April '92. It was conducted in a much disorganized manner meaning that the offices for defence and authorities in charge of conducting the mobilization were confused and did not know in the least what the meaning of general mobilization was. Let's say, some of these officials have been known to say: "No problem, the general mobilization is on, draft everybody". The sentence clearly reveals that these people didn't have a clue of what was going on and what to do with the people they had drafted. Only later did they manage to do it. Attempts to mobilise people came from all over and guys were finally drafted according to some written lists and assigned to a certain position and duty within their appropriate units. They were given some sort of arms. It is important to emphasize that in fact we were a step ahead of other units in the area because we previously managed to provide training for people and get them to know each other. Thus people who served in our units knew each other and felt

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confident to rely on each other. A military formation, as far as I know, is not a sum of 500 men, but consists of individuals who live and act as entirety. In order for them to be able to do so, they have to spend hours together in various situations. They have to be trained the same way, spoken to in the same way etc... Naturally, our units were not even close to that level, but individuals who understood what a true army was strove to reach that level.

### **Did training exist?**

Training existed and was conducted because the war in Slovenia had already started. Soon after it started in Croatia and flared up. It was clear that we were also participants in the war regardless of the fact that we had not been directly attacked as yet.

### **That was clear?**

Yes, it was absolutely clear. It was clear by knowing that there existed a memorandum SANU which depicted the boundaries of Great Serbia. All political speeches as well as Milošević's speech in Gazimestan, and meetings since 1987 had clearly expressed and announced their wish for Great Serbia. The fall of the government in Vojvodina and Montenegro also announced it in a way. It was, in fact, clear that the Serbian hegemony embarked on settling the score with the non-Serb population. When the war started in Slovenia and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina became an active participant as well.

### **How was the issue of armament dealt with later on?**

As far as I know, arms and ammunition were obtained through the HVO main headquarters. The black market still existed. People managed to purchase weapons individually, at essentially lower prices at the time and mostly they bought some special weapons just to differentiate from the others. Thus the armament was not carried out in an organized manner at the beginning. Afterwards, main headquarters and logistics took charge of it.

### **Tell me, what were you doing in that period, what were your main duties and the biggest problems that you encountered?**

The biggest problem was facing real war.

### **Did it happen in that period?**

Yes, the war was on, our units had been sent to the battle front, engaged in combat, sent to the defence line. People died there, some came back wounded. Lack of government and authorities in charge of all the war related matters made individuals responsible for defence and all the related activities. Therefore, as the state did not exist in this sense, the individuals took over the burden of war upon themselves. It was very difficult for commanders to live in the same area with their people, issue orders to those people who lived by your side, take them into battle and return some of them dead to their families. These were very traumatic situations. All that would have been much easier if we had the government, which in turn had its army,

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established chain of command structure, departments which take care of the dead, take them home and inform the family, and finally provide for the family. We had it all much harder, much more painful, and much more responsible - it was actually the time when people did not grasp the meaning of war, what it brought with it, they did not understand that their life might end. A majority of people within various military units did not understand that at some moment their life might terminate and that the life of their fellow soldier might terminate etc. That was the first big problem, alongside a second large problem and that was the problem of mobilization which only increased later on. Why? Because the lists were not adequate, because the offices that were in charge of mobilization were confused in those circumstances and they made a number of mistakes. Some families with three sons had all their sons drafted, while other families who also had three sons had none of their sons conscripted. These two families were neighbours living next to each other. Thus you on one hand had parents crying for their three sons who had all been sent to war while their neighbours had all of their three sons still at home. That created problems of fairness, problems related to sharing equal burden of responsibility of the war etc... Naturally there were a number of deserters who fled to the Republic of Croatia and hid there. Others left for Germany or fled into hills avoiding a draft. I must stress that when the war broke out, the whole population expressed a desire and determination to defend and wage a war and finish once and for all with the Serbian hegemony. Therefore, a clear desire, need and determination to do this at any cost. On the other hand, after first experiences in the combat, fear spread among the people, and that became the key reason for people to avoid combats. The soldiers would be facing that dilemma throughout the entire war. His mind, his wish for freedom obligates him to go to war, and his fear that he might die and leave his family alone and unprovided for prevails. The dilemma would later on cause a number of problems for the army; there would be more deserters while the authorities would prove incompetent to impose sanctions and punishment for those who refused the draft. This was a spiral that would, in fact, cause further problems regarding the rise in deserters and their refusal to fight.

**Tell me you, what was your duty in that period?**

I held the position of the municipal headquarters commander at that time. At the beginning of 1993 I became the Commander of 4th Brigade.

**Now tell me please one thing, as commander of the municipal headquarters you faced a rather difficult situation – well we somehow entered deeper into the problem of deserters - on side the people wished to join in defence and on the other they were afraid that they would die or get hurt. You, as a municipal HQ commander, had in some way a duty to force them to join the army and fight? Isn't that correct? How was that accomplished?**

**What problems did you face? How did you practically deal with the men who refused to join the combat, deserters, and all other problems related to unequal share of war burden? All these problems, I guess, somehow in the end reached you?**

Well look the entire system was flawed and imperfect. It essentially relied on individuals who were a part of it and who bore certain responsibilities and served as some kind of support for the entire system. People showed their willingness to defend and fight by going to the battle front. It was much easier to accomplish that when they were led by someone whom they believed and trusted. Once the unit was finally formed and the order issued, it was necessary that soldiers had a leader they trusted, explaining the order and the whereabouts of their future position and a way to fortify their ranks. That gave them additional strength and suppressed their fear. And in fact, better units were always the ones led by more competent leaders who knew how to transfer military knowledge to their soldiers. In those units father and friend relationship existed first, and then the obeying the order came in the end. Obeying the order came into effect on the battleground, on the last defence line, when soldiers who trusted their commanders executed commands and fulfilled their obligations because they felt safe by executing that commander's orders. In some cases there were refusals to obey the order such as digging trenches for example.

**How did you solve that problem?**

I solved such problems by personal example. In case we had to pull sand bags and make bunkers and people refused to do it, I would come to the position and without saying a word would grab a bag, put it on my back and carry one after another. I would slowly stack them up... and then they would no longer be able to look at me and would finally get to work.

**Was it embarrassing for them?**

Eh, they would feel embarrassed. Well it was the only way. In that sense, Praljak came and immediately became an absolute moral pillar for us. The HVO and its entire system had never had such a person in the past. I had never seen anybody, including ministers of defence, HQ commanders and operational zone commanders, do what Praljak had done by his personal example on the first defence line. He came to the battle front, and showed that it was not disgraceful or degrading to drag sand bags, dig a trench or do things which were necessary for saving one's life, for making the defence possible and that had nothing to do with firing shots. Firing is the last thing you do.

**You saw Praljak digging trenches?**

I never actually saw him digging trenches, but I saw him building shelters, helping- yes, that was..

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Yes, yes. Well, I am a man who believes in same things. I knew that the things could have been done only like that. But he came as a moral pillar from higher ranks. We down below, we more or less all knew each other, it was not that spectacular when I did it, but his example meant a great encouragement for people. In that way he gained trust of the most HVO members, as well as of people who came from the other side, who were against us. Besides being brave, Praljak was determined, clear in mind and in thought regarding events which were underway and how would they end. He was a crystal moral character in comparison with everybody around him. It was obvious in the way Praljak dealt with life in general and in his attitude towards other human being. That was evident after liberation of army barracks in Čapljina. That was evident in his negotiations with Serb army officers in the barracks when he tried to talk them into surrender providing them with a chance to go free and leave for home, or when he offered them an opportunity to join the Croatian Defence Council, or pleaded with them to reach any kind of agreement that would primarily save lives. He primarily thought of lives of the children, young recruits, who were there, which were held as human shields for the Serb officers' own protection, knowing that these children had parents that cared about them and expected them back home. He publicly spoke about that. Regardless of the fact that on the other side there was enemy that would eventually fire at us, he was determined to save those lives. He showed it through his own example, bravely coming to the battle front which was under fire, approaching the barrack fence and calling on the megaphone and demanding that craziness be stopped and children allowed to leave for home.

**Were you present then?**

I was.

**You said that Praljak had crystal moral character in relation to those on the other side?**

Yes. He understood legitimate desire of a man to accomplish his goal regardless of whether that goal was right or wrong. In the sense, he believed that the man on the other side had his vision of life also and his own understanding of what was going on, perhaps twisted, but for him correct. He considered that to be quite normal for every creature that could think. A man that could think about his actions might have been the enemy but not the enemy that deserved to be obliterated from the face of the Earth.

**Well, let's go see about - forgive me for interrupting you – how did Praljak respond to and what happened after the army barracks in Čapljina finally surrendered, what happened when the recruits, soldiers came out?**

I wasn't there at the moment, but I talked with their parents, with some of these people who were in the barracks, children, and people who were there, and I gathered from conversations

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with my fellow soldiers who participated in the operation that those children, recruits were left to us, probably in hope that we would kill them, or partly kill them, imprison them etc. While in fact they were gathered together, given a chance to take their uniforms of and call their parents. They were given food, they were talked to and assured that nobody would kill them or hurt them in any way. Actually the parents were called and the children were allowed to go home.

**You were not there at the time?**

No, I was not present at the time.

**Relationship between the HVO and the HOS were at one point rather complex, were you present then, do you remember any of it? Can you remember a bit and tell me what kinds of problems were involved and how were they solved? Or at least how were they attempted to solve?**

Well, I - frankly speaking – I cannot understand how the HOS as an organization appeared in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I know that at one moment, the main HOS HQ for the entire BiH appeared in a building across from the municipality in Ljubuski, headed by the late Blaz Kraljevic.

**When was that?**

In 1992 already, I'm not sure whether that happened in March or May. The sudden appearance of the main HOS HQ was quite unclear to me due to a simple reason that the HVO had already reached a certain level of organization as the defence force of Croatian people in BiH, maybe it would be better to say, within certain borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina which did not function as a state at that moment. Therefore, as a state, BiH was not able to defend itself from aggression. It had a leadership that intentionally or unintentionally wandered around trying to figure out what to do and how to do it. The Croatian people together with the Muslim people voted sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina within AVNOJ frames, giving legitimacy and the right to the leadership of BiH to defend BiH from any kind of aggression. Although it was already evident that it was Serb-Montenegrin aggression. Finally, the then President of the Presidency Alija Izetbegović distanced himself from the open aggression on the village of Ravno in Herzegovina, publicly declaring that "it is not our war". He obviously referred to the Muslim people and not to the Croats in BiH because the Croats in the village of Ravno were the ones who had been attacked and killed. Therefore it was clear that they had some other hidden intentions and that actually Croats, according to the law and constitution, had a right to their own self-defence. The HVO had already been formed and organized into some kind of an army that could have confronted the aggressor up to a certain level. In those circumstances, appearance of HOS was very unclear to me.

**What was the composition of the HOS?**

I don't have any information regarding the composition of HOS, but I suppose that in the beginning the organization did not count many people. Perhaps there were some 100 or 200 people at the most. I did not know most of those people. They weren't domicile people, people from Ljubuški. Those who came from Ljubuški were not people of any importance in their native town. The HOS would not have had any significance if it hadn't been for the war. Two different military formations cannot survive side by side during the war regardless of their composition. At the time, I had two meetings with Blaž Kraljević, a commander of HOS for BiH, at his demand. During our first meeting he demanded that my unit submit to the HOS units and his command. That did not make any sense, and I of course refused it by saying that I was not competent to decide about that issue, and that there existed higher HVO authorities whom he should turn to. I told him that I could not decide on that matter and that I could only forward the message to the HVO highest officials. Our conversation thus ended. Later on he demanded yet another meeting, I cannot exactly remember the time, where he acted arrogantly and talked about the same topic and demanded exactly the same thing.

**What does it mean acted arrogantly? Did he threaten you? Did he openly or in some other tacit way blackmail you? How can we be more specific regarding that arrogance?**

Well, arrogance in the sense that he claimed that they were real army, that they believed in historical borders, that they would create some kind of a country within historical borders, that we didn't know what we were doing. I couldn't understand whether he referred directly to me or to the HVO on the whole. Well, my reply was firm and clear and I directed him to the main HVO headquarters regarding the issue and told him that I did not want or wish to talk about it any more. Afterwards, we did not have any additional meetings or confrontations. I turned to the head of the municipal office in Ljubuški, he was the one who allowed Kraljević to use the premises, on several occasions demanding to find out what was going on. I did not receive any reply except that he said that he was not able do anything about it. I actually saw that at that level nothing could have been done. I received explanations from the main HVO HQ that the entire HOS affair was a sporadic phenomenon which would eventually calm down and disappear and that it would not turn into a serious problem. However as the time went by, the issue turned into a very serious problem and multiplied in several ways: HOS started issuing its own participation cards which it sold for 500 German marks to the ones who did not want to go to the battle front. Instead they were given the opportunity to join HOS units and refuse their HVO military obligation. In other words, they avoid being drafted and going into combat. That kind of behaviour in a way disintegrated the HVO units, because all HVO soldiers who were drafted and mobilized had an obligation to defend their people. Alongside draft problem and

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bad behaviour of some of the HOS members furthermore deepened the problems between us and made it evident that one day we would confront each other.

**When did you have that feeling?**

Well it was, I think after...

Zagreb, March 2006

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**The interview was conducted in Zagreb at «Leut»restaurant on the lake of Jarun**

**The dictaphone is on.**

My name is Ivica Tomić, I was born in Ljubuški on January 23, 1964 with the residence in Ljubuški.

**Ok. You may deliver your statement now.**

I saw general Praljak for the first time in the town of Čapljina near the bridge where I was positioned with the Ljubuški municipal headquarters unit near the river Neretva facing the positions of Serb reservists and the units of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). I think that it was somewhere around April 11, 1992 in the early evening hours or late afternoon hours. Praljak was a striking, energetic and authoritative person. He immediately suggested ways to fortify our positions and explained what was to be expected from the enemy and how to improve military formations and units on the battle front taking into account that they were not ideally organised and people had not have any former experience nor military training. Praljak tried to encourage us by his personal example and teach us how to behave and think about the situation in which we found ourselves. Later on, he examined the rest of the positions alongside the embankments of the river Neretva and around the barracks. He demanded the implementation of necessary changes and corrections regarding our positions and behaviour of soldiers at these positions. Afterwards he wanted to see the school and assure himself that reservists were safe from enemy fire and he demanded information on organisation in general. His detailed questions and solutions of the problems which we couldn't solve or solved poorly – and his attitude and behaviour towards soldiers on the battlefield made me aware that he was an experienced soldier with good organisational skills and knowledge. I also gathered that he was a brave and moral man because he did not hide behind his rank or position. Throughout the entire war and later on in peace, his behaviour and attitude only confirmed my first impression of him. He was extremely and absolutely moral and courageous person, and very sensitive to the feelings of other people – regardless of the fact whether those men were present or absent, regardless of the side they took in the war. He always knew how to differentiate between political goals in war and personal destinies of each individual who found himself in the war and that seemed of the utmost importance to me. Throughout the entire war he behaved as an officer and gentleman. He knew exactly what kinds of responsibilities were expected of his rank and he applied his wide knowledge in every situation. He behaved as a knight and commander in war, and represented a moral paragon for the ones who met him on the battlefield in or out of combat. According to my opinion, general Praljak is a man and officer whose decisions, actions and behaviour during the war were absolutely in harmony with human morale and Gods laws, and

his personal characteristics were exclusively positive. He joined the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) at the beginning while it was still a temporary army formation and a part of political and state establishment necessary for fight against Serbian-Montenegrin aggression and while it had a number of flaws caused by lack of time and urgency. A need to form such an organisation or army formation was seen in passivity and incompetence of the then central government in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and their failure to confront the obvious aggression. In spite of the numerous TV recordings showing JNA tanks moving in direction of Kupres, with clear intention of occupying positions on Kupres plateau and breaking through towards Split, the then central government treated the matter indifferently and tacitly allowed the movement of the army towards Kupres. Even the then president of the presidency of BiH, Alija Izetbegović came and asked the people to let the tanks pass through with a promise that they would not be used against the citizens of BiH or against Croat people. People finally listened to him and allowed the column to pass through, which ended attacking and destroying the villages of Ravno and Uništa. Alija Izetbegović, the then president of the BiH presidency delivered a public speech and said that it was not their war, which was a clear signal to the Croat people in BiH that the central government lacked the will and responsibility to protect the integrity of Croat people living in BiH. The HVO was the only possible reply to the Serb aggression and means of protection of the Croat people in the region. I should stress that the HVO members were of Croat, Muslim and Serb ethnicity – depending on structure and composition of population within certain municipalities of BiH and on number of volunteers who joined the formation, and who were more than welcome because of the shortage of armament, military experience, skills and training. Fear became also an important factor. Most of the individuals feared death since the war was something unknown to them, something that brought death and suffering. At the beginning the HVO consisted of the main headquarters headed by colonel Mikulić, as far as I remember, and municipal headquarters. These municipal HVO headquarters consisted of population living in their appropriate municipalities and were registered at the registry of the municipal Office for national defence. There were also a lot of unregistered people, young men who recently grew up, and were not included in the latest JNA recruitment lists due to the overall political situation and the latest events. There were also some people who had not been registered at all because the registry lists were all the time moved from place to place and hidden away from the JNA. It was feared that the JNA would take the lists away the same way as it had taken the armament. The HVO was a kind of growing army and organisation facing various problems to which it was unable to respond adequately at the

time. However, a wish to solve these problems and to improve the level of organisation was evident from the very beginning. The HVO command staff consisted of various kinds of people: some who had certain knowledge, some who didn't have any knowledge at all but were brave and ready to assume certain responsibilities regardless of the fact that they didn't know much. Usually the commanders, especially low ranking commanders, were chosen by the soldiers themselves. They trusted those men the most and were ready to entrust their lives to them.

**But that had nothing to do with their military experience or knowledge, or competence?**

No, nothing at all.

**That was usually the most dominant person, or wealthier, or louder than others in the village?**

Absolutely right. That was usually a person who had some kind of authority. That had nothing to do with military knowledge. It could have had something to do with it but not necessarily. There were not a lot of men who had any previous military experience anyway. Regarding the HVO as military formation we cannot talk about some really well formed and organised military unit. The formation consisted of a bunch of men gathered from all over, from various addresses, who hardly knew each other and in that sense they lacked a true military spirit. They did not have an absolute trust in each other, and did not know how others within their unit would react in extreme situation. In spite of all that they more or less successfully managed to get around on the terrain.

**Ivica, I have just one question, what was the age range of people in these units?**

The age range was very wide. Age range of the people who enlisted in the army or were drafted was from 16 to 70, as far as I remember. The men who were drafted were registered as army conscripts in the military registry. That means from 18 to 60 years of age...

**Were they all capable for military duty?**

No they were not all capable. However there were a lot of volunteers who self-willingly joined the army because they wanted to defend their homes and parents. Thus we had a situation when young boys of 15 or 16 years of age wanted to enlist. Since the overall situation was rather chaotic, we did not allow them to actively join the military formations but we gave them other tasks and put them in logistic units etc...fearing that some other units might accept them and send them to combat.

**This question will sound rather awkward, but I will ask you anyway.**

**Why didn't you mobilize all the guys from 20 – 25 years of age?**

Well, a correct registry of all army conscripts did not exist at that moment. The reason for it was simply that. A valid registry of all army conscripts did not exist. And the other thing was that the Croat corps in

BiH and Croat citizens simply wanted to enlist and join in defence. Even if you had wanted to prevent them from joining the army, you could not have done it, because they had already purchased arms on black market, through private connections, and they would appear on the terrain on their own and there was nothing that you could have done about it. The mere fact that the defence line was so wide and that the aggressor was so powerful was enough to accept any willing man in defence against the enemy. These men were assigned to different units and put under command taking into account all possible situations that might arise. Some of those men later got out of formations self-willingly etc... That happens in well organised armies as well. The age range was thus from 16 to 70 years of age. Some of these men would have never been accepted as soldiers in some well-formed and established armies, but in our case that was simply inevitable. Thus in the beginning, the HVO consisted of main HQ and municipal HQs and their appropriate units which were in turn formed by citizens living in that territory plus volunteers. At that time we tried to conduct military training for soldiers. We thought them how to use arms and how to act and behave within their appropriate units teaching them about the obligations and morale in oncoming war circumstances. The war was new to us commanders as well and thus we wished to avoid all unacceptable military or human behaviour according to the Geneva Conventions etc..

**Were the people at that time aware of the importance of the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law?**

Well, yes, we informed them about it. The leaflets had been printed and distributed among the soldiers. However it is a different question all together how and to what extent were they ready and able to accept that information during the war circumstances where fear and uncertainty stood side by side with willingness to defend their homes and people...

**Were there attempts to teach them about it, systematic, organised attempts?**

We absolutely tried to teach them. We were aware of the fact that responsibility for our own life as well as for other person's life should be respected. Our attempts were in a way successful, as much as they could have been. The HVO formations advanced later on and operational zones were formed under the command of the main HVO HQ. The operational zones had in turn under their command the HVO brigades which were in fact transformed municipal HQ units. Most of the brigades were in fact renamed municipal HQs. Several municipal HQs formed one brigade. For example, my brigade, 4<sup>th</sup>HVO brigade, consisted of special units, military police unit and home guard units. Well I believe that written documentation on army structure and chain of command structure probably exists at the Ministry of Defence of HVO. All those units were

filled with soldiers drafted in the general mobilization which had been declared on April 3.

**April 3<sup>rd</sup>, which year?**

1992. We have to keep in mind that mobilization was not carried out successfully and had many flaws: lack of updated and detailed registry of all army conscripts, lack of institutions in charge of conducting the general mobilization and keeping a record on conscripts. There were many people who avoided the mobilization and fled to the Republic of Croatia or abroad. That directly made an impact on the men who were mobilized. There were cases where you had families with four men on the terrain and other families with none of their members on the battlefield. That caused bitterness among guys who were ready to sacrifice their lives for defence of their homes. The various municipal decisions were brought by municipal leaders which allowed them to hide their sons behind certain local community committees. That furthermore caused dissatisfaction and disappointment among soldiers on the battlefield.

**Was all that done in order to avoid mobilization?**

There were lot of problems which had a direct impact on drafted men. That is why general mobilization was declared several times in a row, but it was never completed in a satisfactory way. Problems remained and grew and finally reflected in refusal to leave for the battlefield and shortage of soldiers on the field, etc. I wish to make clear that at the very beginning of the war, population of BiH was aware that they should confront the aggression, defend their families, homeland and homes. The will was evident and the first mobilization clearly showed it. Many volunteers joined the army in the first run. However, there also existed fear of getting killed among those men. Throughout the entire war, soldiers were faced with a contradiction between a decision related to defending their home, family and homeland and fear of getting killed and leaving their family alone. When we talk about unsuccessful mobilization we have to keep in mind that such were the objective circumstances.

**Well that means that the mobilization was not conducted successfully, is that right? There seemed to be many problems as well as various attempts to solve these problems?**

That is correct. But you have to keep in mind that the first general mobilization was conducted very successfully taking into account the percentage of people who came and joined the army. We did not have enough armament for all of them. We did not have possibility to arm and equip all those men. There were even cases when men sold their rifles to each other when rotations of units were underway. Since we did not have enough uniforms people passed on their uniforms to other soldiers during rotations as well. Some people came dressed in different, more colourful

uniforms etc. But as the time passed, the HVO grew into the best military formation in the territory of BiH.

**Ivica, shall we continue our interview in accordance with your notes, or shall we insert the part regarding the HOS which you mentioned earlier?**

Well yes, we can talk about that as well.

**We can continue logically with that part first, because I am interested in how the HOS units functioned at the time. How were they equipped and were they competent? What was the relationship between HVO and HOS like? Did the existence of HOS help the entire situation or cause more problems?**

Well, according to my knowledge at the beginning there was a small number of HOS in BiH in comparison with the HVO units. The fact is that a large number of HOS members self-willingly joined the army ready to sacrifice their lives in defence of their homeland and people. They believed in past, they relied on stories from the World War II where similar troops managed to confront the enemy. It is my opinion that the HOS was later on led by men who were out of touch with their time and not up to their tasks. They refused to comply with any legitimate decisions of the legal authorities at the municipal or state level and finally they got lost in their ways of conducting things.

**Ivica can we talk a bit more concretely?**

Yes we can.

**Who were those men? What were their objectives? What were the problems between HVO and HOS on the field?**

Well, listen, practical problems appeared at the very same moment when the main HOS HQ for BiH was established in Ljubuški, led by Mr. Kraljević. He denied the existence of the HVO from the very beginning and refused any kind of cooperation with the HVO.

**Why? How were they different? What was their fundamental difference?**

The HVO was formed according to the constitutional decision by the legally elected authorities of the municipal communities in BiH. After holding free elections and appointing officials in charge at various institutions they brought a legitimate decision on establishing the HVO. The HVO had clear goals and that were defence of BiH, population, state, homes etc. While HOS on the other hand, I cannot tell you exactly, how HOS was formed, whose decision was that?

**Didn't HOS use a slogan "Croatia all the way to the Drina river"?**

It was utopia, and wrong political attitude. Croatia all the way to the Drina River.

**Well, we reached the point here in our interview where you talked about problems on the battlefield such as shortage of men and of ammunition?**

That's right.

**On the other hand we have...**

An idea.

And that was a wrong political attitude, because it would have implied that all nations in BiH wanted to have Croatia all the way to the Drina River.

**Well we don't have to get into the analysis of that issue, but it seems to me that was the HOS's main idea – at least at one time of its existence?**

Correct. That is correct. However certain circles within Muslim-Bosniak people, later on Bosniak, saw a political chance for accomplishing their marginal goals and took advantage of it by infiltrating within the HOS units.

**We took a little break, and now we can continue. Is that right. HOS becoming a ....?**

That Muslim infiltrated into...

That's right.

And tried to accomplish their political marginal goals.

Was it really marginal?

**Did Alija award ranks to the members of HOS units?**

Well yes. Because..

**Was Alija a marginal person?**

No, he was not. But my opinion is that the mere idea of Islamic state...of BiH as Islamic state was marginal from the very beginning because it was untouchable. It caused and it might have caused many more casualties, that's correct. Every such idea might cause great casualties. But it seems to me that such idea was doomed to fail from the very beginning because the whole thing should originate from overall composition of population in the region. The population in the region was European, not Asian, Islamic or else. Islamisation within BiH started with the war. Why did Alija help HOS? Well because it was the best way to lessen the significance of HVO.

**What was the ratio between Croats and Muslims?**

You mean within HOS?

Yes.

They were many more Muslims in HOS. Their number was not proportional with the structure of population. Around HOS main HQ for BiH there were a great number of unknown people. Local people did not know them.

**If we compare a level of armament between HOS and HVO? Who was better equipped?**

Well, it is clear that HVO was much better armed, and that HVO units were more numerous. If it came to conflict between HVO and HOS:...

**In the sense of men, soldiers?**

HVO was superior to HOS in every aspect. There is no doubt about it at all. If conflict had started between HVO and HOS, there would have been bloodshed and that would have been entirely unacceptable. Fortunately it did not come to that. HOS wouldn't have stood a chance in any kind of confrontation...

**But it could have caused the bloodshed? Were there any situations which might have led to that?**

It is a very strange thing that it did not happen.

**But it could have happened?**

Absolutely. It was felt in the air every day. The possibility of bloodshed was felt in the air every day.

**What was the main reason for it?**

The HVO had already been formed when HOS appeared and Mr. Kraljević, leader of the HOS units, denied the authority of HVO as military and political organisation and refused to cooperate, and submit to it or join it. He refused any kind of cooperation.

**And now what do we have? Two parallel armies which were armed?**

Yes, the fact was that we had two armies in the same territory during the war. The mere existence of two different armies was enough to cause conflict. It was a miracle that we avoided the conflict. The conflict was avoided thanks to intelligent and competent men within HOS who had their brothers and relatives in HVO and who exactly knew what was HVO's attitude and stand regarding defence of BiH, Croat people, homes and families etc. Escalation of conflict was thus avoided thanks to those people.

**I suppose that a lot of energy and effort was needed to prevent the conflict in the situation where two armies shared relatively small space and had different objectives. Let us remember Praljak and his attempts, better to say his role in the relationship between HOS and HVO? Have you witnessed anything significant regarding the matter?**

I was not present at talks between Mr. Praljak and the HOS leaders, nor was I present at some meetings where HVO leaders discussed mutual endeavours to unify the armies for the joint fight against the aggressors. However, I heard the stories, read in written proclamations and listened to Mr. Praljak's opinion. He publicly stated that it was unacceptable to allow any kind of conflict between HOS and HVO, because both armies had

clear defence goals regarding BiH. That would in a way mean that brothers would fight one another.

**You were not present at those talks?**

No. I wasn't present. However, I know that general Praljak was exerting his efforts to prevent the conflict and offered some kind of cooperation to Mr. Kraljević that seemed entirely acceptable. Close associates of Kraljević know about that because they were probably present at the meetings. I was not that highly positioned within the army so I was not present.

**Have you ever received at your level some kind of command, did Praljak say something about it?**

No there was nothing at my level. I talked to Mr. Kraljević at his demand on two occasions. On both occasions we talked, and at the time I did not know anything of his refusal to cooperate with HVO, however he demanded on both occasions that I submit my brigade to HOS command.

**That means that regardless of the endeavours that had been made to unify the armies?**

Yes regardless of that. At the time of our first meeting the brigade counted some 2000 men. At that time it was still a municipal HQ unit. Later on that brigade counted over 4000 men because it consisted of three municipal HQ units. HOS on the other hand, at that time, did not even have two companies at its disposal. It did not count more than 200 men. Our conversation... both of our conversations ended with an agreement that there would be no sense to start any kind of conflict between HVO and HOS. However, after his insistence, that 4<sup>th</sup> brigade become submitted to HOS, I told him that it was out of my competence to decide about such things and that he should turn to the HVO main HQ in Grude. We parted like that...

**When did he try to make you submit to HOS?**

I think in May, 1992. If I remember correctly.

**O.K.**

We met for the first time in May, 1992. I think that the second meeting was held in July, 1992. Mr. Dedaković was also present at the meeting. Mr. Dedaković's attitude was that the conflict between HOS and HVO would be senseless and that both armies defended interests of Croats in BiH. He had a correct attitude, a correct logic. Except in just one thing and that was when they demanded, when Mr. Kraljević demanded that my HVO brigade be submitted to their command. After that our second meeting ended just like the first one. I sent them to talk to the main HVO HQ.

**Were those meetings tense, tiresome?**

No. The conversation was more or less ok, high tones were used only in some parts of the meeting. I did not permit myself to use a commanding

tone, and on the other side I did not allow him to use that tone on me or to allow him to think at any moment that he was in command of my unit.

**What kind of role did Tuta play in all that, I mean his punishment battalion? How they fitted in all that and how long did that last?**

I do not remember exactly when. No. The punishment battalion appeared at one moment and promoted itself on its own. All of a sudden it was considered a very brave unit etc...regardless of the fact that the name of the unit suggested something completely different.

**What did it mean? Who were the people in that punishment battalion?**

As far as I heard through various stories, some of them were released from prison in exchange for participating in the war and defence against the aggression. Others within the battalion were really brave and honest guys who sought a chance to prove themselves and show their courage on the battlefield. Most of those honest guys got killed in a very short time. Somewhere around the time when the late Čikota was killed near Jablanica the punishment battalion lost the credibility because competent and moral men were all gone and there only remained men of questionable values.

**What does that mean? What were their interests?**

Well I cannot be exclusive.

**Ok.**

It is probable that the battalion still had some moral and brave guys, but they lost their influence within the battalion. Other men prevailed within the battalion, those who under the pretext of fighting for their state and defence of their people, had altogether selfish interests and were only interested in personal gain obtained during looting and arson committed after military actions. That's it.

**How did punishment battalion fit into the military structure of HVO?**

I do not know exactly but I don't think that it ever had. I did not have any idea that HVO was in command of that unit.

**What does that mean concretely, we said that there had been attempts within the HVO to set the rules for correct military behaviour according to the Geneva Conventions related to the treatment of prisoners during the war? Did the same apply to the punishment battalion? Let's say if commanding officers of HVO demanded discipline from his soldiers and forbade torching of houses, destruction of property, looting did they also had any kind of authority over members of the punishment battalion?**

My impression was, taking into account all what happened in the terrain, and listening to the stories of others, that the only person who had the authority over punishment battalion was Tuta. He had the exclusive

authority. He surrounded himself with men who had been released from prison and he simply commanded and dominated as the sole authority of that unit without accepting any authority of the minister of defence of HVO or president of the Croatian community of the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia.

**Was Tuta a kind of man that you could talk to or reason with? Was he ready for compromises or able to accept some suggestions?**

I think that he was not a man ready to compromise. He imposed his own will very severely, at any price, disregarding the political and military decisions of HVO and main HVO HQ. The punishment battalion and Tuta had never been under command of HVO. They refused to accept the main HVO HQ or minister of defence of HVO's command.

**Does that mean that they always did what they wanted?**

Well as a principle yes. There were many incidents involving arbitrary behaviour..

**Were there attempts to restrict such behaviour and prevent it?**

Well I suppose there might have been...

**Were you present when such attempts had been made?**

I was present in Mostar.

**When and where did you witness those kinds of problems?**

I was present in Mostar at the meeting held at the premises of the main HVO HQ. It was on May 11, 1993 and there was a major outbreak of the war between HVO and Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ABiH) in the town of Mostar. As far as I remember, minister of defence, Bruno Stojić, a commander of military police, Valentin Ćorić, head of SIS, Ivo Lučić and commanders of units involved in the conflict attended the meeting. The main topic was how to stop and solve the conflict between HVO and ABiH. That was a concrete case when general Praljak demanded that..

**Was Praljak present at the meeting?**

Of course he was.

**He was there in what position?**

He was a commander of the main HQ, I am not sure, and he demanded that the conflicts be stopped.

**Praljak did?**

Yes.

**Wait a minute, and you were present at that meeting?**

Yes, I was. He said that the conflict was meaningless, and that JNA and Serbs only profit from it. The conflict did not have the ultimate goal. He had made efforts to stop the conflict and negotiate with the other side in order to create preconditions for peace and establish relationship that would guarantee and keep that peace.

**Praljak advocated that attitude?**

Yes. He wanted the conflicts to end at the positions where both armies were located and further negotiations to be carried out? Tuta insisted that the army attack and capture the Old Bridge.

**Tuta said that at the meeting?**

Yes. He said that he would, and I cannot remember exactly whether he said destroy or capture the Old Bridge in exchange for the late Čikota.

**For the guy who got killed?**

Yes for the guy who got killed. It is entirely unacceptable in military ethics. What does it mean, to take or destroy the Old Bridge? That did not mean anything at the time. Perhaps even today that would mean nothing. And that caused the quarrel between Praljak and Tuta. Verbal conflict.

**Tuta advocated his own thesis?**

That's correct.

**Praljak insisted on his own opinion?**

That's right.

**He insisted on what you have already mentioned.**

That's right. I cannot recall the exact word, but the quarrel escalated and after none of them wanted to give in, Tuta drew the gun out and pointed it at Praljak's head. He was very, very nervous...

**Who was nervous?**

Tuta was nervous. He was saying something like: "I will kill you, I will kill you this instant", he ordered Praljak to put out his cigar. He did that to humiliate him in front of the others...

**Just a moment Ivica, I would like to understand what was going on at the meeting. If I gathered correctly a meeting was held, disagreement, tension, conflict occurred between Praljak and Tuta?**

Yes.

**In respect of military hierarchy that is in a military sense, Tuta should have listened to Praljak because Praljak was his superior.**

Yes, yes, but..

**But instead of listening to Praljak, he pulls out a gun and points it at his superior officer...**

Yes, he pointed the gun at Praljak's head, and told him that he would kill him, and ordered him to put out the cigar which he had been smoking.

**Ah, that means, that one held a gun, while the other held the cigar?**

Yes, that is exactly how it was.

**O.K. what happened later? Did Praljak put out his cigar?**

No, he didn't.

**He didn't listen to Tuta?**

No, no.

**What happened?**

He said something like this: "Damn, if I put it out!" Tuta kept repeating: "I will kill you now", very nervously and noisily,

aggressively...trying to frighten him. “Sit down or I will kill you, I will kill you now, I will kill you now.” When I saw that the command structure didn’t work and realized that the situation was deeply disturbing, I stood up and ripped off my rank insignias from my uniform and threw them on the table in front of general Praljak. And I left...

**I do not understand it. Who was superior to whom in this case?**

If the punishment battalion had been under command of HVO then Praljak would have certainly been superior to the punishment battalion.

**It should have been?**

But it had never been, as it seemed to me.

**Well in other words, Tuta should have listened to Praljak?**

Praljak, yes. But it was not like that, and I ripped my rank insignias off my uniform, and threw them in front of my commander. I threw them in front of general Praljak.

**And was Tuta still waving his gun around at that moment?**

He was still waving his gun. I threw the insignias on the table and took off towards the exit with a clear thought in my head that I would demand from my superiors to withdraw the army from the town of Mostar, because I realized that a normal command of the army there couldn’t be possible. When I reached the door, I heard Tuta’s words: “That’s the way to do it my son”. It hurt me very much. I knew how the things should have been done. It was exactly why I was leaving. I did not leave because of general Praljak but because I realized that it was impossible to exert any control over Tuta. I turned around when I heard his words, and gave him a very obvious look and got out of the room. I was at the point of deciding whether I would start shooting myself. I went out, looked for the other brigade commanders and demanded that they withdrew the units.

**What happened later on in that room between Praljak and Tuta?**

I do not know what happened later. I left. There was an obvious problem related to the split command structure. That was unacceptable. And it clearly showed that HVO did not execute its command over the punishment battalion.

**Wait a minute. Let’s talk a bit more about the meeting. Let’s talk about the moments before you left the meeting. You told me that minister of defence, Bruno Stojić, commander of military police, Valentin Ćorić, commander of SIS, Ivo Lučić were present at the meeting?**

Yes, there were some more military commanders there. I cannot remember the names.

**And how did they react to Tuta’s threats?**

They did not react. They sat down and kept quiet. Nobody had any strength to confront him.

**Minister of defence? Commander of military police? Main counter-intelligence officer? With all their positions and authority they could not confront a single Tuta?**

As many as they were, they did not dare to ...

**They were all afraid of Tuta?**

They were all afraid of Tuta. If that hadn't been like that, they would have solved the problem of Tuta long time ago. Since the problem was not solved, I think it was fear. Fear for their lives... I do not know what else but fear.

**How did things later on developed in Mostar after that meeting? Did Tuta in the end do what he wanted?**

Well look here, I know that I managed to arrange with my commander that they withdrew the units from the town of Mostar within two days period. Some left that day and other the day after. Later on the events in Mostar did not have anything to do with me. I cannot concretely say anything about the events that followed since my units left the town. How long did that last? We know about the destruction of the Old Bridge...attempt to destroy the bridge, or attempts to organise the destruction of the bridge...Today we see, by reading the expertise, that it was possible that members of Tuta's battalion participated in destruction of the bridge, at least some of them. I believe that those were some mercenaries...

**O.K. I understand. I mean I don't understand, and lot of people will never be able to understand who was in charge, who brought the decisions, who was in command, who listened to whom, who was responsible for whom... well anyway. Let's continue. After that meeting, the following day, what were the repercussions of that meeting?**

I don't know anything else. I attended the meeting and I saw what was going on. And after I saw that, I left.

**Did you have any other opportunity to witness Tuta's behaviour and actions later on?**

I remember once Tuta calling a meeting in the evening hours at the building of Ljubuški. The mayor's secretary invited me to the meeting. When I arrived Tuta was already there.

**Was that after the meeting in Mostar?**

I believe that it was after, I don't remember.

**We are not sure about it then.**

No, I don't know whether it was before or after. I believe that it was after, because when I entered through the door Tuta said: "I know this fellow." Well now, how big Tuta's influence was, or better to say his reign of terror, on some of those officials was evident in the fact that he was the one to call the meeting at the municipal council and he was the one who

demanded their presence at the meeting. In other circumstances, the meeting would have been held at some normal hours. Tuta attacked the municipal officials and accused them of not sending the army to some terrain. I don't remember where. They defended themselves by telling him that they were not in charge of the army and that they had nothing to do with the army. They told him that the brigade command staff was there and that he should talk to the commander. He talked to me very calmly and asked me why the army hadn't gone to the battlefield. I told him that my army was on the terrain and that we couldn't discuss that matter there. I also said that if they had any problems they should deal with them. That was the core of our conversation. They continued to talk, and I said that I had work to do and left the premises. I remember that. I also remember the story that everybody knew very well how some members of the punishment battalion tortured late Nosić.

**I remember that story.**

Someone harassed Nosić and his girlfriend, while he was on the leave of absence, somewhere at the bar in Ljubuški. Nosić was seriously abused and to the point when he was not able to take it any longer and killed the guy he maltreated him. He turned himself in the hands of the military police, surrendered his weapons, and said that he had killed a man demanding a fair investigation and questioning. They put him in the prison on Heliodrom. Tuta men broke into prison and took him out.

**They broke into the prison?**

They broke into the prison, which was located opposite the military police station responsible for protection of the prison, and took him away. I heard that story, the story was circling around for some time. They allegedly took him to Široki Brijeg to Tuta after which all traces of him were lost. There were some indications that after they had tortured him they burnt his body. That's a case that will not be forgotten which testifies how the punishment battalion spread fear among the population which it had been supposed to protect.

**Well in the then circumstances, Tuta and his battalion are important elements to mention. I think we managed to depict how and to what extent the battalion spread tension, fear and disorder? Apart from some good and decent men within the battalion, there were lot of bad things going on.**

Absolutely.

**I am interested now in your contacts with Praljak? I'd like to ask you the following question: do you know him long, were you together for a long time? What was the most difficult thing for Praljak to do? What were his most difficult moments? What were the most difficult events in which he participated?**

Perhaps I wouldn't be the right person to describe his most difficult moments during the war. I would have to put myself in his position to be able to do that.

**I ask you as a man who was close to him.**

Yes. I can say what wasn't difficult for him. Problems weren't difficult for him. He found solutions for every problem that he had encountered. He was absolutely a brave, moral, dominant, educated person, very good analyst, or psychoanalyst of other individuals or masses. He was able to solve all the problems related to masses without too many efforts. It did not seem that those problems represented any great burden for him. He accepted all problems and find ways to solve them. He even solved problems which the institutions had failed to solve. Often these problems referred to unfairness and lack of justice. One of these examples was exchange of prisoners between the ABiH and HVO that had to be done by helicopters and after..

**Where was that?**

I know that helicopters landed in Međugorje. They picked up Muslim prisoners and transported them back to their army. After that they were supposed to release Croat prisoners, captured by ABiH, but the helicopters came back empty. The explanation was given that they would bring the Croat prisoners after the second round of Muslim prisoners had been released first. The mothers of captured Croat soldiers surrounded the helicopters and did not allow them to take off. I think that Morion, he was a commander of International Forces in BiH then, asked general Praljak to enable the second transport of ABiH prisoners after which the captured Croat soldiers would be released on the second flight. General Praljak refused, negotiations were demanded. Morion said: "You can do it General, we know that you can do it." The general replied: "Yes, I can do it, and that is exactly why I refuse to do it. If I did that, I would lose trust and support of those whom I represent. I refuse to do it."

**Were you present?**

No, I was not present. I only heard interpretations of these talks and events. The helicopters remained there and the entire thing did not function any more. Second example was solving the problem regarding free passage of humanitarian convoy for ABiH. That happened in Čitluk. Croat refugees who were expelled from that part of BiH by the ABiH units, and whose beloved ones had been wounded and killed there prevented the convoy from passing. Nobody could have forced those people to allow passage of the convoy. Praljak estimated that the convoy should be allowed to pass, he talked to the people and forced them to give in and allow passage of the humanitarian convoy. I had never seen him without a solution. He always had a solution and nothing was difficult for him. He was hurt only by injustice, especially if injustice was done on the

higher level and he did not have time to react to it. When they said: Praljak destroyed the Old Bridge etc. His statement regarding the destruction of the Old Bridge was not the following: “No I did not destroy the Old Bridge”. On the contrary he said: “I would have destroyed hundreds of old bridges for the sake of one of my soldiers’ small finger. But I did not destroy the old bridge, because there was no need to destroy it”. That speaks about his morale and courage contrary to the things that came from the enemy side. I cannot grasp at the moment what was difficult for him. It would be too pretentious for me to speak on his behalf.

**O.K. Ivica, could you please tell me whether you witnessed the event involving people returning from fight in Mostar, and when Praljak waited for them and delivered a speech in order to prevent any future retaliation?**

That was on a day when Zvonko Čuvalo was killed. He was a commander, or deputy commander of a battalion within 4<sup>th</sup> brigade. Parts of 4<sup>th</sup> brigade were involved in fight in the town of Mostar.

That man, late Čuvalo was a distinguished soldier and had a reputation among soldiers. He died on the battlefield, on Bulevar. After he was killed, members of his battalion demanded to go home. When I say “demanded” I mean there was no way that you could have forced them to stay. It was impossible. That speaks of how the military structure in a way functioned or did not function. It was feared that in case they return to their municipalities under such psychosis that they would retaliate against Muslim population living there. In a way, Praljak was concerned about their return. He tried to alleviate the trauma and insisted they leave for Humac and attend the mass and talk to the priests first. It was feared that they might begin firing shots into the streets, break into Muslim houses etc...everything might have gone wrong in their heads, thus Praljak told them to go to the mass on Humac which had previously been arranged by himself or Toma Tomić. They were taken to the mass and a sermon related to the latest events was delivered for them. The sermon was used to ease their mind and make some things easier to accept and understand. I cannot remember all the details. I don’t know. Mostly he predicted problems that might have arisen from various situations and found ways of solving those problems.

I have here written something regarding the functioning and behaviour of men within HVO units. It has to be emphasised that it mostly depended on individuals in command who had character, attitude, strength, ability to command etc. I had some of these men in my unit as well. There were also men who wanted to hide behind the masses and avoid doing their duties. In second half of 1992 and followed by 1993 we already had regular practice of rotating soldiers after a 15 days tour of duty on the

battlefront. Certain formations would hold positions on the frontline for some time while rotating men within their own units. Somewhere in 1993, I held a command within tactical group 2 holding a position between Stolac and Popovo polje. We had a situation when a group of soldiers, around several hundred men, who were supposed to leave for their tour of duty, did not wish to leave and posed all kinds of questions. Among other things they asked me about the territory we held, duties and tasks that they were supposed to execute while in the army, etc. The soldiers also asked a whole lot of questions to which there were no answers such as: Where is my neighbour who fled to Germany etc? They refused to leave for the battlefield for three days. They demanded that the brigade commander come and give them some answers. I had been present in such situations numerous times before, but since the procedure turned into a regular one, I passed the duty onto lower rank commanders and other lower level officers within battalions and independent companies. Since they did not succeed in forcing the army to leave, I went there again and replied to all their questions again. After half an hour of exhausting questions we finally reached the end. I told them: "Now stop with these questions. You got your answers. Since there are soldiers who have been waiting for the rotation for three days on the battlefield, and since they are soldiers like you, who have families and have a right to return home, and who have already exceeded their stay on the battlefield for three days, who will assume the responsibility if some of them in the meantime get killed, get into the trucks and leave for you tour of duty". I turned around in direction of my car and heard the following comments: "Where will you go for lunch, to this or that restaurant? You could have put more antennas on your vehicle, referring to the car with mobile and radio station antennas." Finally after a third comment: "If it were bought by your father you wouldn't drive it around here". I turned around and asked: "Who said that?" Half of the soldiers were at the point of leaving and going home. One of them stepped in front and said: "I said it". I wanted to grab him by his shoulders and tell him that was not the way to talk to...but he grabbed me instead and wanted to wrestle with me and discredit me in front of all those people, and I knocked him out. I hit him with my head and knocked him out. A friend of his, who was standing next to him, reloaded the rifle and pointed at me. I told me: "Shoot, shoot what are you waiting for?" Since he did not react I took his gun, removed it and said to the two military police officers: "Write a report and take this guy to an ambulance to mend him, and all of you off to battlefield". They asked: "What if the doctor says he cannot go to the battlefield?" I responded: "Doctor gives advice but I make decisions. Off with him to the battlefield." Finally they left for the battlefield. That was one of the examples how I functioned on duty and

solved problems. There was no institution or authority above me in charge of sending them to the front, nor had there existed the authority that would impose any kind of sanctions for disobeying the order. They wanted to go, but feared getting killed. They accepted my authority because I was there with them all the time on the frontline. That was the example of how chain of command functioned. That happened on all levels. Praljak had contacts with international community and the other side in negotiations however you had such examples at higher instances as well. On the whole, chain of command structure within HVO mostly depended and relied on the authority of the commanding officer. If a commander was a competent man his unit was competent as well and if not the case was the opposite.

**Here you talk about a case of imprisonment? When was that?**

I think that happened somewhere in May 1992. The open conflict with Serb-Montenegrin forces was underway. Sometime before we had five members of the municipal HQ killed on the battlefield. The unit that was supposed to relieve the guys on the frontline refused to go. I knew that they were afraid to go. Fear was the only reason, at that time there were no other reasons for refusing to go the front. When first five men got killed, fear prevailed. At my request to obey the command, they refused. I told them: "O.K, I will arrest you." At that time the prison did not exist. My threat seemed funny to most of those men. However they were lined up at the school yard which had a very high fence and gate. They refused the order again and I demanded that they put down their weapons and place them on the truck. They asked about the prison, and I told them that the prison was the school yard and that I would simply lock them up. Half an hour later some of the commanders came to me and said that the army finally decided to go the battlefield. We gave them back their arms and that was it. I accomplished my goal, returned their weapons to them and they left for the battlefield. That was the psychological game we played. You had masses that were scared, and reacted as they reacted. I had another extreme case in May or June 1993, when a smaller number of men, 2-3 men, within my brigade wanted to achieve higher positions within the brigade command staff by hiding behind some stories such as: "We don't want a communist in our brigade...etc..." That statement referred to the Chief of Staff of the brigade, Zdravko Vujević who was a former JNA reserve officer who had put himself at our disposal when he returned from Germany at the beginning of the war. He joined the brigade command and was later appointed Chief of Staff of the Brigade HQ, my deputy. It is difficult for me to remember everything now but I finally informed SIS about these problems on two occasions. Since I did not receive a reply, I arrested 4 members of the brigade and demanded an investigation regarding the entire matter. I wanted to keep our brigade

from harmful influences since it had already been established and well organised. Four days later they were released from prison. I do not know on whose authority. A few days later, a written order was received on transformation of the brigade from one into three separate brigades. There was no justification for such an order because there was a shortage of command staff that would be able to lead three separate brigades. That way they would not be able to achieve more soldiers only manage to gain fewer soldiers. I learnt about that from other people. I was not informed properly as a commanding officer, nor was I asked for an opinion. Practically, by annulment of the brigade I was dismissed from my duty and on July 1, I resigned from my post.

**In 1993?**

In 1993 on July 1. A few days later I received an order from general Praljak to come to Uskoplje together with Zdravko Vujović, a Chief of Staff, Tonči Knezović, a driver. We went there and helped improve Uskoplje brigade formation and worked on consolidation of defence line on Uskoplje battlefield. Not long after that, I was wounded on August 24 1993 and transported to the hospital. In the meantime we worked on consolidation of defence lines through finding the best logical military positions, establishing firing positions, fortifying shelters for soldiers and tanks. The army there had been facing various problems, because they had lot of various units, different habits and different people gathered together. However we managed to improve it and raise it to a certain level. Praljak was already in Uskoplje, he left the Bugojno area after the fall of the town of Bugojno. He managed to consolidate the defence line after a great number of soldiers withdrew without any reason at all and fled the area. He managed to stop and fortify our positions there. I witnessed how much efforts he put in establishing chain of command structure in circumstances when each commander thought he was the best, his men were the best, and that he knew the best. In conflict situations within local military formations I saw Praljak put all his efforts and strength in reasoning with those people and making them face the reality of the situation.

**After you were wounded, you did not go back?**

No, after I got wounded I did not return there.

**But you kept contacts with Praljak, is that right?**

Yes, even today.

**While you were at the hospital, while you received medical treatment?**

Absolutely, regarding hospital, I can only say that..

**Did Praljak come to visit you?**

Yes.

**Where were you then?**

Throughout out the entire war Praljak cared greatly about his soldiers and he shared their destinies as if it were his own. He felt great responsibility toward each soldier, and he highly valued every individual and his efforts in those circumstances. Honest and evident efforts. First I received medical treatment in war hospital in Rumboci and later on I was transported to Split. After Split I was transferred to Dubrava, Zagreb.

**Did he visit you?**

Absolutely. He asked about me via phone, send other people to visit me, and they brought me supplies.

**Was he like that towards you only or towards other people?**

He was like that with everybody. There were 138 wounded men.

**Were there Only HVO members in that department?**

No, there were soldiers from ABiH as well. I remember a guy from Bihać, or Cazin I cannot remember well. I remember him quite well because he stayed at the hospital for a long time There were some more members of ABiH there.

**I am interested in one thing. When Praljak brought supplies and things for people, did he make any difference between wounded soldiers from HVO and wounded soldiers from other armies?**

No, not at all. He did not make any difference between human sufferings. There were 138 of us there. We all received the same supplies. He visited all wounded soldiers and greeted them, accompanied by the guys who carried and divided supplies among all us equally.