

DRAGAN VINAC

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The interview has been recorded, the tape has been filed under

***dvinac*
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The interview was conducted in Vitez

The interview is being recorded. Could you please state for the record your name, date and place of birth, and place of residence.

My name is Dragan Vinac, born in Vitez in 1961. I reside in Vitez. I'm currently retired; I was a member of the HVO (the Croatian Defence Council). That's it.

Tell me what happened to you during the war, when did you get involved in it?

When did I get involved?

Where were you? What were you doing at that time? How did you get involved?

Well, listen, the first information that... i.e. everything that happened in Croatia was in a way reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

So, in the beginning different things could be heard, and it turned out the war was not going to end in Croatia. It gradually moved to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as expected...I was around thirty at that time, married, with two children; I felt I could help. Through some talks... at that time there were some district-level headquarters; one of the more active units...I think my way of thinking is the same...one of the more active units that were, I mean, a part of the HOS (the Croatian Defence Forces). Somehow, I don't know... I was drawn... anyways, I joined the HOS. I joined the HOS in 1992, and I was immediately ready to serve our commanders. So, we were on battlefields starting from Herzegovina, then here, in Bosnia; so, one baptism by fire happened down there in Herzegovina, when there were no indications that there would be any conflicts here, precisely in this part of Central Bosnia. In the meantime, the army of Republic of Srpska intended to go down from Vlačić to Lašvanska Valley, i.e. from Travnik, Vitez...I don't know... all the way to Kiseljak. I was involved in that.

And, how should I explain this...so, during 1992 we in a way cooperated with district-level headquarters, and we were sent to the first lines. So, from Turbet to Jajce... and my role at that time? So, the HOS was...in a way...

What was your rank at that time?

I was a deputy of the HOS commander in Vitez.

The HOS commander's deputy in...in Vitez?

Yes, Vitez.

All right. When did you meet general Praljak?

I've heard of general Praljak through the media...because I, I mean...in a way all weaponry, ammunition, material-technical supplies had to pass through Herzegovina. So, we had nothing here. We were getting it down there, i.e. we went to the headquarters to get anything we needed for the unit. That's where I've heard of Slobodan Praljak. The conflicts were also bigger and more serious down there. Personally, I had no contact with him, but I've heard of him...in Herzegovina. So, already at that time, we were trying to arm ourselves for the forthcoming conflict that actually happened. Some smart guys decided it. What else?

How did you first contact Slobodan Praljak? When did you contact him directly?

In 1992, I can't remember the exact month; so, after the start of serious conflicts up there above Novi...Travnik...I mean...I heard Slobodan Praljak had arrived. That's when we had some kind of training, here, in the area of Vitez County, and in the meantime we also moved towards Travnik. There was one group of commanders, and in the meantime we reached the Orijent hotel; I think the meeting was in the Orijent hotel, when the meeting was almost over. The meeting was almost over, and that's when I saw Slobodan Praljak. We didn't talk much, but my commander, Darko Kraljević, had an opportunity to talk to him during an informative meeting, during which they shared ideas...In a way, they had a similar character, the two of them. Later I concluded their characters were similar, because they both demanded discipline, they didn't allow any lack of order. And, in my opinion, regarding the Vitez County, where regional headquarters were formed, there was a lack of order. And Slobodan Praljak himself

was present at that meeting attended also by the territorial defense units of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the HVO members; that means it was a common meeting held by Slobodan, who had already taken some measures – he checked the reports and visited positions, that way realizing the situation was critical. It was critical, because people were sent to their positions without any instructions or quality weaponry. He didn't allow that. He didn't allow some men to command – those men who saw themselves as great commanders; he was sending them to prison. According to my information, he sanctioned two men with prison sentence. I think one of them served as a battalion commander at that time, and the other one, I'm not sure whether he had some position in the brigade, and after that...after that...well...

Do you know the names of those men?

Well, one of them got killed, I think his name was Slavko Papić, and the other one was Slavko Milićević...he worked back then...Milićević...now, whether they were guilty, I...I talked with one of Slavko Milićević's men, and he was surprised by all that, but he had to impose order.

If I understand correctly, Praljak reacted to a certain problem present at that time...a problem regarding discipline?

So, the problem was with discipline. Discipline...since the situation was serious and you could lose your head and all...people had to get serious. Now we are getting back to that lack of order I mentioned earlier; some people lacked order, they thought things would be easy, but already at that time people were dying, some were wounded and all.

After that one time, did you ever get a chance to meet him again?

Well, that was already in 1993, and later in 1994...But not in this area, because we had already been sent to different battlefields.

Does that mean you were not in this area later or you...?

Well, very soon I had to go to Herzegovina with my unit.

Now we are talking about that period and events, which means you were here...until when? Let's try to set a time period.

Well, September of 1992.

Until September?

Until September, which means we spent more time, with a few interruptions, in Herzegovina than we did here in Central Bosnia, with a certain group of people. But later, through talks and all, you get the impression that Slobodan Praljak maybe should have come even sooner to impose order into the defense units in this area.

Why?

Why do I think that!? Because he has a specific way of commanding, and he wasn't afraid to visit the positions; he wasn't just sitting and receiving reports...he was simply that kind of a person, who would take an individual with him, someone who would show him the area, and go to the very place to check on things.

And what were the specific, practical problems that existed, and that make you think Praljak was needed here?

Well, he was useful; look, he was useful, because the man had experience. He had combat experience gathered in Croatia; he was experienced in commanding, and controlling commanders. And he was needed, regardless of the fact that certain officers here – they were not officers, they were ex JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) officers who...as it turned out later, this way of fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina wasn't something they learned in school. Personally, I state that Slobodan Praljak was more capable than 90% of those ex JNA officers, in spite of the fact he never finished military academy or any school in the former Yugoslavia. He had a way with people, he knew how to approach an ordinary soldier, a squad leader, company and even brigade commanders; he was the most strict with people that lead a brigade in a bad way. He could just feel it; he could feel when people weren't right for the job.

Tell me what was the relation between the Croats and the Muslims while Praljak and you were here?

The relation between the Croats and the Muslims...there was a certain rivalry, a rivalry between units, because the Croats were the first to defend Bosnia and Herzegovina, while they were trying to arm themselves in some way, I don't know, through some connections. But it was all done locally, around certain objects and around the town, just to show off with guns, while they weren't valuable in a battlefield, at least not here in Central Bosnia. So, the members of the HVO were the first to defend the Lašvanska Valley, Jajce; now, they were probably...I don't know if they had an order, but...well, it is possible they were ordered not to go. It is possible someone gave them an order not to go...'let the Croats go, let them die, and we'll see what happens'; at least that's how I feel. But, a smart person figured out that the Serbs were not going to stop at Lašvanska Valley, but go all the way to Herzegovina, Split, and...So, someone had to do something to stop them. They were stopped here just above Travnik...Jajce, as far as possible, the territory was kept. So, we...I...from Lašvanska Valley...now, I cannot say for sure, but a lot of people died in Jajce, and the positions in Jajce were only about one hundred kilometers from us. The town itself is about sixty kilometers away, but the battlefields were about one hundred kilometers away.

At that time, i.e. the time I am talking about, when general Praljak and you were together in this area, were the Muslims and the Croats holding the defense lines together?

Later they did. And there were no conflicts, no, how should I say, critical situations between the territorial defense units, the HVO. Later they also figured out they had to safeguard. They were safeguarding mostly their villages that were, in a way, inhabited only by the Bosniaks. They concentrated mostly on that, so in 1992 you have a common command. Therefore, they were in meetings together. And, that's what I've mentioned earlier, Slobodan Praljak held a meeting at the Orijent hotel, and not only with the HVO commanders, but all territorial defense commanders.

Who was there from the territorial defense?

Well, I can't remember the exact names, but there were all those from the Travnik, Novi Travnik county; everyone who meant something was present at those meetings. So, as far as I know, no differences were made between the levels of command in the units of the territorial defense or the HVO; they all worked together.

How well were they trained, equipped and armed, the HVO component as opposed to the territorial defense component, at that time? Was there a difference?

Well, we, the Croats, probably are specific, we can't hide anything. What we had, we carried. Those were.....I think every fifth soldier had an automatic gun. There were some guns with which you were more likely to kill yourself than someone else. We didn't know about it at that time, but later it turned out that the territorial defense had weaponry at least three times better than what the HVO had, but they kept it a secret. Why? I have no idea. Later it turned out they kept it a secret, because they planned on using it for fighting, I don't know, maybe the Croats. So, at that time there were some... after we reached the positions near Vlašić, someone said 'the flash of death, something was fired behind us'; it was something new to us. Those were the M-84 guns, i.e. machineguns, and later it turned out they were used when the lines above Turbet and Sečevo, I think that was the name of the village, as far as my memory serves me, were broken; they had a lot of casualties, I don't know how many people died, but they had a lot of wounded soldiers. That was something new to us. This weaponry even today represents the highest quality weaponry in Europe or the world.

How did they get a hold of it?

Well, I have no idea. Someone gave it to them, I don't know. If we had...first of all, that's what I've said a moment ago, if we had had it, we would have carried it. It was understandable

that no one would have risk using the 'Šokac' gun when there was a fifty-fifty chance the bullet would go straight and come back.

Yes, that's how it was, but...we had something, we weren't scared, we just went and later figured out what to do. That was how it was mostly done...mostly, with people who were on the lines at that time. So, to resume it again...the Croats occupied 80% of positions in Lašvanska Valley and Jajce. Around 20% was occupied by the territorial defense members, exactly where their villages were; so, if there was 80% of Bosniaks, that means there was 5% of Serbs or Croats. They were more engaged in those areas, I don't know what they safeguarded. Maybe only their homes.

Tell me; were there any joint actions at that time?

A joint action...well, yes. There was a joint action that lasted perhaps some two hours, but no one was able to coordinate.

Why?

Well, because...listen, people were in certain situations...I don't know how many casualties there were at that time...there was a joint action on Vlašić.

When we talk about a joint action, we refer to a joint action of...

...the Croats and the Muslims?

Yes.

Well, there was, as I've already said; so, in my opinion, the Croats were so naïve and stupid, they went...hm, they had a feeling they would reach the Vlašić plateau. The Muslims, I can't remember which side they were on, left or right, I don't know...I only know no one was to be found once the shooting started. As far as casualties are concerned, I honestly can't remember the number, but there were casualties.

Were you involved in that?

At that time, I was on the other side, but they participated earlier...Now they were...they were not on the other side, not exactly on that position...I didn't mean to say 'on the other side' regarding the unit; we had the same training, a certain number of people we sent there. So, we were about three, three and a half hours ride from Vlašić. But the unit, as such, participated. Personally, I did not, and I can't talk about something if I wasn't there, but later, through reports and meetings, it turned out that the action was a failure. That joint action of the HVO and the territorial defense units was a failure.

Tell me what changed after Praljak left this area? Did anything change after he left?

I know there were a lot of talks about his leaving, and imposing order, so in a way some commanders changed their thinking...they started...maybe they realized how the meetings with subordinates should be run, i.e. meetings between commanders and their subordinates...I don't know, but in a short time you could feel that commanders changed in some way, they started to act as professionals.

You were a member of the HOS? Were there many Muslims? The HOS units contained quite a lot of Muslims, at least for some time?

Yes, in Herzegovina.

And here?

No! Within the HOS in Herzegovina and Zenica. In Vitez - no, Novi Travnik - no, Travnik - no.

If there were no Muslims in your unit, then we cannot open a topic about the relation between the Muslims and the Croats, the number of Muslims, etc., because that was...

They respected us, we respected them. We had our headquarters in Kruščica, where the Muslims comprised 90% of population. And they knew we were fighting against the Republic of Srpska, there were no problems there. Actually, they offered their help, food; so, there were no problems in Vitez or Travnik. We respected each other, even though we wore black uniforms, but they knew we behaved...

How long did that kind of positive relation between the Muslims and the HOS last?

Well, you know, by the time the fighting started in Vitez, the HOS was no longer there, but only in Novi Travnik. The HOS from Novi Travnik and Vitez became the HVO's special unit under general Blaškić's command. From general Blaškić to president Boban, Milivoj Petković...

Actually, you haven't met Praljak after that, is that correct? Praljak left...

Yes, he left. At that time the fighting started in Lašvanska Valley, the area was surrounded...everything was surrounded, and no units or commanders were able to reach that area. They could reach it later by a helicopter, and that was in July, August. So, we were surrounded five, six months, and helicopters came, as far as I know, as far as my memory...

That is it, that is all. Thank you very much.

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