

BRANKO ŽULJ - BANE

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Let's start, dictaphone is switched on. I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself: please tell me your name, surname, date and place of birth?

My name is Branko Žulj, call me Bane. I was born on June 16, 1963, in Kupres, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Žulj?

Yes.

Tell me what's your occupation?

By profession I am a pensioner, at the moment. Before the war I was a driver of heavy trucks, afterwards I joined the Croatian army and remained in the war and so.

When did you meet Praljak?

I met Praljak in 1993. I met him then. I was told by Colonel Željko Šiljeg that general Praljak would arrive and that he needed someone to drive and protect him. He needed somebody to drive him around. I met him in Tomislavgrad in 1993, somewhere at the beginning of January. At the very beginning, after the New Year somehow.

What was at that time happening in Bosnia?

The war was on. The Croats and the Muslims jointly fought against the Serbs, however, in 1993 the conflict broke out between the Muslims and the Croats.

OK. So, Praljak came in January, 1993. What was your first meeting like?

Ah, simply put... Big man, loud man. Sturdy. Željko Šiljeg said: "Bane, this is general Praljak. You will take care of him, you have the HVO car at your disposal, drive him wherever he needs to go." We had some kind of jeep. We went everywhere, in direction of Prozor, Gornji Vakuf. I don't even know where...where all those things happened. He is a great man - first he is a man, and then soldier and everything else.

You started to drive Praljak in January 1993?

Yes. It lasted with interruptions, throughout his stay in Bosnia-Herzegovina, somewhere until July. I'm not sure. I don't know exactly. Approximately until that time. Because I was already in Pula on August 15, in the light infantry brigade.

What were you doing during that period? Where did Praljak go?

He moved around Tomislavgrad operational zone, specifically the Rama Headquarters. He covered that area. At the time the headquarters in Rama existed and were situated slightly down in direction of Široki Brijeg. He moved along the front line there. The man was ... He was a general but he was with the people. He was not an office man. The man was a general but he was with people constantly. He was constantly on the terrain with people. He kept control over things as much as he could at that time. There were all kinds of armies, commanders, wild units – let's call them so. Sometime around June or July we were on the mountain of Bokševica. We stayed fifteen days on the Bokševica Mountain.

Why was mount Bokševica so important?

It was important to pull the civilians out... Strategically important ... There were some civilians there, in Kostajnica, in the municipality of Konjic. These civilians were surrounded and had no exit. By the Muslims ...

They were surrounded by the Muslims?

Yes. The Muslims held those positions. We were there at the time, trying to hold Bokševica, held it, then lost it, whatever. We held Bokševica as long as we could in order to pull out the civilians. When we got the civilians out we let it go.

These civilians were exclusively Croats?

Exclusively Croats. That was ... Kostajnica. I think there were some 200, 300 people mentioned, I do not remember well. I think there were some 200, 300 people mentioned but I can't tell you in details because I do not remember exactly. And then, perhaps two days before we let Bokševica go, some civilians got out. Among others, a woman with two children in her arms got out and the general asked about the children's age. We thought that the children were a month or two months old, but they were seven days old. Seven days! The twins were brought seven days after the woman gave birth to them. It seemed to me that they had been walking all night through the Muslim territory to reach us. They crossed a very large mountain, a high elevation. They came in the morning around 5 a.m., I do not remember well. I think about 4 a.m. The civilians from Kostajnica appeared at 5 a.m. I remember the woman, I would recognize her even today. She was among the last ones in the column. Two boys carried her children. I asked "Are those hers?" They said: "Yes, she gave birth to them seven days ago. "

What did the general say when he saw that?

Nothing. He just said "We did a great job!"

What memories do you have of mount Bokševica?

Very ugly memories. The Muslims were there ... I have no idea if they were especially angry at Bokševica or at us. Under their laws of war, they shouted Alahu Ekber, and all kinds of other battle cries... They mostly attacked us in the evening, at sunset, at dusk. It

was an immense terrain ... and they were mighty. We had a lot of wounded and dead, unfortunately. We held mount Bokševica for a while, first few days we held the entire Bokševica, but later we lost elevation after elevation, because it was a huge mountain. An endless line, which you could not control. Only local people knew their way around there. You reach one elevation, separate from others and get lost. Very difficult terrain. Perhaps one of the most difficult terrains that I have ever seen. You hold a certain elevation, they you lose it and recapture it again.

General was present there?

He was with people, raised their morale. "It is important to hold this position until we get the people out. When civilians get out, we will let it go. We do not need it »

And did people wish to abandon their positions?

Well ...

Was there fear among people?

Fear. The fear was present in people.

Were there attempts by men to abandon the positions?

Well some men left the positions, you know.

And what did Praljak do? Was he present?

He begged the men to return. Here's one example of what we did. He said "Come Bane, let us go and keep watch together with men, to raise their morale." We stayed three nights in a row with men on the watch.

And you were on the watch?

Yes, on the watch. A trench for him, and a trench for me. We were together. I mean, we stayed some hundred meters away from each other - but we were together. Three nights in a row. All night long. Did not do two hours shifts, but all night long! From dusk till morning.

And Praljak did that?

That is what Praljak did! I stand behind my words. That is what Praljak did and I responsibly stand behind my words! He told me verbatim: "Bane, do not let these capture me, you rather kill me. If you do not kill me, I will be exchanged as a prisoner and then I will kill you later! "That's exactly what he told me! He told me verbatim.

When was that?

And it was in those days, maybe three or four days before we left Bokševica, possibly the last five days. He said: "Bane, think well about what I told you. Do not let these capture me. Imagine that tomorrow, all television stations broadcast 'General Praljak captured on mount Bokševica' Kill me, do not feel sorry for me! "

And what did you think when he told you that?

What did I think? At first I thought "The man is fooling around, is he crazy or what? Gone beserck?". And what was I to think? He is a General? How can I kill a general - and even more so he was a general of my own army? How? What would you do? How would you react?

I do not know. I would be confused.

I ... We parted some 100, 150 meters, and I laughed at myself later, and said "what, is this guy crazy? telling me to kill him - how can I kill him? "But, thank God – it all ended as it ended, and we surrendered Bokševica three or four days later. But I did not mention, for example that there was one part of the territory on the way to Bokševica, from a village held by the HVO...there were some two, two and a half kilometers of the climb to Bokševica which we did not control. It was no men's territory.

What does it mean? How did that function concretely?

Well, concretely. We went to Bokševica ... We climbed on Bokševica "on the razor's edge" – as we Bosnians would popularly say. I drive, the general takes out the rifle, rolls down the car window and says "Bane, now step on it". We crossed that patch of territory several times over a period of a few days. All these days while we held Bokševica, we did not control that patch of the land.

But you passed through it?

Yes, we passed through that land.

How wide was that patch of land?

Well, a kilometre and a half, maybe two. It was a hilly patch of land going through woods. You climb up on the mountain. He was with me then, the rifle in his hand and open window.

You were never directly attacked?

No, we were never directly attacked. Well, for example, one day the chief of artillery was killed - we passed through that territory perhaps half an hour earlier, at the most. I and the general climbed up the mountain before. Majić came after us ... What was his name? I

can not remember. He was the SIS, or the PD? I do not know, I can not remember any more. Also the chief of artillery from my town, Stanko Grgic, was killed by infantry arms on that patch, unfortunately.

He was killed then?

Yes, he was killed in the vehicle.

Were they ambushed?

That's right, they were ambushed. Enemy set up the ambush. They ambushed us every now and then... The cut off our cables and communication. They came... we could not control that terrain anyway. We did not have enough people at our disposal nor equipment.

What did you consider as the biggest problem for you, for the army?

There were not enough people, many died. Bokševica became notorious. You know that in those circumstances, when you mentioned among men, among the soldiers that they had to climb up mount Bokševica – their hair stood on end! The strong Mujahedin units were positioned there ... There were many Mujahedin units there. There was a group under Zuka - I think they were called "black swans". I'm not sure, but I think they were called "black swans". They were one of the strongest Mujahedin units there.

And they were there?

Yes.

The guys who had any previous experience of warfare with Chetniks told me that fighting Muslims was far more difficult.

Well, look ... We waged war with the Serbs ... we waged war with Chetniks ... They pounded us with long-range artillery but their infantry never had a chance to take us. Never. Never! Serbs pound us for two days and then, when they destroy everything, you can leave – there id nowhere to hide any more. They pound us with artillery for two, three days. The Muslims did not do that. The Muslims ... They attacked. They had strong infantry. They outnumbered us, their infantry was strong. I stand by my words. Every soldier who fought ... I say, with the Serbs it is small potatoes compared to Muslims - if we may say so. According to my opinion, the war against the Muslims was twice as hard...

O.K. and how does the story of Bokševica continues?

We were there ... Well, I think 15 days? I do not remember any more because it has been ten-twelve years since the event. Basically, after we evacuated the civilians from the area,

we abandoned our positions on Bokševica. We withdrew, pulled out civilians and left it. We did not need it. We attacked Bokševica solely to evacuate the civilians from Kostajnica. We heard stories about thousand civilians staying there, however only some 200 to 300 people came.

In what condition were these people when they came?

Well ... This should be ... These people ... Exhausted, in fear, in panic, they were surrounded down there. First of all, they were surrounded for at least a month, month and a half - and their fate was uncertain.

When they saw Bokševica and Croat soldiers they were thrilled but fatigue was visible and the fear.

Were there any wounded people among them?

I do not remember. I tell you, Bokševica would have been abandoned earlier if civilians had not been at stake. The army would have abandoned the area if it had not been for the general. If Praljak had not been there, the army would have fled the region long time ago. Men were scared because there had been many people killed and wounded - and I will repeat again that it was fucking difficult terrain for fighting battles. Military equipment and technology was of no use there, only infantry.

So, you think - that if there had not been for Praljak on Bokševica, these civilians would not have managed to get out?

Civilians would not have managed to get out, surely. Hundred percent that they would not have gotten out and we wouldn't have kept the positions there that long. We would have let go. Because there was no more strong will, morale fell. Nobody could understand why Bokševica had been held for such a long time. They were attacking us, killing us – so everybody wondered why - what? what was it? Bokševica would have fallen certainly, and the army would have left it in the state of panic. Great panic reigned among the people because there were lots of dead and wounded. The enemy was strong. And then, the general came out and told the men: "Guys, you leave - but I know who has to stay here: I'll stay and Bane! Who wishes to stay with me until the civilians are pulled out, let him stay. Who wants to leave, guys – hit the road! "

Praljak said that?

Verbatim! Verbatim:" I know who will stay: I will remain and my driver!" I said: "I'm staying with you", and then the guys decided to stay. It was a relief. They decided to stay because they saw that the general remained with them, he would not leave them. Actually he never left the terrain – we sometimes went to the HQ for couple of hours, and that was all. His decision had a positive psychological impact on soldiers ... See they thought: "General remains - so why would I leave? His family is not there!" There were guys from Konjic, who were waiting for their moms or dads. "We have to stay, someone has to stay

and wait for those people, and two elevations have to be defended: Urina Ravan, and the other I think it's called Šilj ...”

What was it called? Urina Ravan?

Urina Ravan, we were there, and Šilj ... and the elevation 1315. Or 1513, I do not remember well. These elevations had to be held in order to evacuate the civilians. When civilians got out, we started to withdraw.

Were there been any attempts to abandon the positions on mount Bokševica?

There were attempts. I already told you about one incident ... Four or five days before we left Bokševica panic spread all around. People gathered at Urina Ravan after abandoning both elevations Šilj and 1315. The Muslims did not know that then. If the Muslims had known, we would have lost those positions! They did not know. People left these positions and the general begged them to return and said "People, just one more day, or two, just to pull civilians out" He begged them.

And what did people say?

Some turned a deaf ear, some said "We are leaving!" - And then he stepped right in front of them and said: "I'm staying here, I will try to stay here and who is willing to stay – let him stay". And people made their minds to stay and they stayed. I personally led thirteen or fifteen people back to Šilj.

So, you went back again?

Back. Back to the trenches and waiting.

How long were those elevations abandoned?

Well, they were abandoned that entire day. People left them in the morning and only by night fall we managed to get there again. Luckily for us, the Muslims did not know that. If they had known they would have captured those positions, and that would have been a real show.

When Praljak said "I and Bane will remain" – did everybody stay or only a few people?

Everybody stayed. All people who were there at the time stayed. Maybe more people joined us, reinforcements, I do not remember ... I think some people were sent to us from Tomislavgrad by Glasnović. I do not know but I think we received reinforcements. We stayed three or four days with civilians, and afterwards we slowly withdrew over the next few days trying to pass unnoticed by the enemy. People were slowly pulling out of that area together with their equipment trying to avoid any more attacks and additional casualties. The entire evacuation lasted a day, a day and a half ...

And what happens later, after Bokševica?

Gornji Vakuf happened later, Bugojno fell. Bugojno was captured by the Muslims at that time. We went to Gornji Vakuf, because it fell into the Muslim hands on two or three occasions.

We stayed at the Prozor Headquarters. The entire affair lasted for a very long time ...It seemed it lasted an eternity. Vakuf fell one day and was recaptured the following day, a nearby village of Bistrica was recaptured one day, and it fell the following day... and so forth and so on.. One day they drive us away, the next day we drive them away...It lasted for days like that.

Where? Where else did you go after Bokševica?

We went to Gornji Vakuf. The town of Vakuf was of pressing concern then. Battles were fought in Vakuf. We did not go to Bugojno because it was encircled. The Croats who lived in Bugojno were cut off from the rest of the world. The exit in direction of Gornji Vakuf did not exist for them - the only exit for them was towards Kupres, towards the Serbs, towards Chetniks. We stayed in Prozor for quite a long time. I do not remember how long, but a very long time. There were all kinds of problems regarding Vakuf. There was an incident involving Tuta once there. He came accompanied with his fellows. We were inside the HQ and he disarmed the entire HQ.

Can you tell me a little more about the event? It is of interest because it refers to the problems that existed regarding divisions within the army and parallel chain of command structure. What happened later with Tuta?

Ah, Tuta was a special story. Tuta's army was a special story. Tuta came there, disgruntled ... Allegedly he looked for a boy there with whom he allegedly had had a fight. We were sitting inside the Unis premises, the HQ was located there, and suddenly Tuta and some guys -the guys I did not know – barged in and disarmed us. We were only armed with guns. He demanded that we take off our guns and belts. He quarrelled with us. I left the premises and the general stayed there. Who else was there? I cannot remember. Someone from the Rama brigade was there. They stayed inside and I left the premises and went out.

When was that?

I cannot remember the dates. It happened in Spring. When I came out, there were Tuta's men carrying rifles all around the building and halls, his "punishment battalion." I left the building with my hands raised. There were people outside. I lighted a cigarette. Nobody knew anything. Nobody knew what was going on, who were they looking for?

And where was Praljak at that moment?

He was up in that HQ, we were up. I was with him and I think that the deceased Marinko was still alive then? Marinko Beljo. I think that he was the commander of the Rama Brigade. There was someone else ... There were also some other guys – operatives present there....

How did Praljak react then?

Ah, he was angry. He said "Tell me Tuta what is going on? What seems to be the problem now? ". However they did not start to quarrel until everybody had left the office. I left the HQ.

Praljak stayed?

Yes, Praljak stayed. The operatives left. All guys left the premises. Praljak stayed and I do not know if anybody else stayed with him. I do not remember. Basically, we all had to leave. Tuta stayed and some of his people.

Tuta's men stayed?

Armed with rifles. Now, there was a confrontation ... I know only that the general responded and said "What, what is going on Tuta? What's the problem? Why do you act stupid? "We left our arms but I do not know what happened later. I never asked the general.

How long was the general in there?

Well, I think about half an hour, perhaps a little more - if I remember well. Afterwards I got my weapon back again intact. There were lot of problems there among various brigades. The Rama Brigade acted on its own...Tuta's men on their own. Praljak was calming down the tensions between them. If it hadn't been for Praljak there would have been chaos all around. There would have been a general chaos there if it hadn't been for Praljak.

In what way did Praljak try to unite people, ease down tensions and prevent chaos?

He talked to everyone, to everybody, to each and every soldier.

And what was he saying to people?

He explained that people should not bring decisions or do things on their own, self-willingly leave their positions, show disrespect to their commanding officer. If a soldier could not accept such behaviour he should take off his uniform and get out of the army, he should become a civilian instead of a soldier. He attempted to establish order in Prozor also among various armies there. He attempted to...

Were there various armies there?

Yes. There were various armies which acted on their own. Praljak was once very angry with a chief of police Elijah Franjic.

Why?

Because of disorder in the bar. Praljak asked him to set the curfew and prevent the army from drinking. He asked him to close down pubs and bars – but it was an impossible task. Praljak attempted that in every possible way.

What else did Praljak do in order to establish cooperation and order?

Praljak tried to encourage the military and civilian staff to cooperate closely together on establishing and maintaining order. There is a traditional saying: hard times arrive to any city of village through which the army passes. It doesn't matter which village. Praljak had attempted to establish coordination between civilian and military sector but it was impossible.

Was there resistance towards Praljak and his endeavours?

No one openly opposed him or refused to obey his order openly - but they just did not do it, they did things on their own.

And how did Praljak respond to all that!

Ah nothing. Then he was worried, angry, swearing. "God Damn, I told him to do it, but the fool did not do it - what now? Now I have to kill him because he did not do what he was supposed to do". We talked about these things and I told him a few times "Do not worry, you can not change the whole world. You've come to help, you have dedicated yourself completely to the cause – If anyone refuses to respect or obey your orders, what can you do?" He was angry and felt badly about it. Praljak wanted to protect civilians on either side. Muslims lived in Prozor and no one did anything to them ... Praljak did not allow it.

What do you mean by “did not allow it”? Did Praljak punish someone for disobeying an order, acting in a way Praljak did not want him to act?

He shouted, swore and yelled. People listened but ignored what he was saying. You could not do anything about it. Those who disobeyed received scolding but the question was how seriously they took it... the war was on .. and it was impossible to control such a large army, such a quantity of people passing through the city. I accept responsibility for my words. If Praljak's subordinates, commanders of various brigades, are not able to keep an order among their men - Praljak is not in the position to control each brigade. You had several brigades there as well as several battalions. I, as a commander should control my own company or battalion, you have to control yours...

Well, did Praljak, as a general, perform duties of an army general - or did he, in order to keep balance, and establish necessary order, perform some tasks far below his rank?

Well look, he could have sat in the big armchair in some office, somewhere, for instance in Grude HQ. He could have sat there in that big armchair and he could have said: "Just carry out my orders on the terrain". But no! He was present on the terrain all the time, quarelled with everybody and demanded order, discipline and work. I do not know lot of commanders. I know Glasnović. He was always on the terrain with his people as well. I also know some other generals such as Filipović. He was my general when I came to the company and he also went to the terrain with us. That's what general Praljak did.

Does that mean that you as Praljak's driver had a lot of work? Passed a lot of kilometres?

I told you, we worked days and nights, entire days and nights. He did not sleep in hotels. I do not remember that we have ever slept in a hotel.

Where did you sleep?

We slept in the office, we slept all around in different place. Both of us.

August 2005, Zagreb