

05. SHORT RESPITE

Thursday, April 19, 1945

For twenty-four hours now we were waiting to move out of Slatina and from our sheltered life in a school. The night had been spent in the normal routine of two-hour sentry shifts, except for keeping the horses in harness and the ammunition loaded on the carts and barring the emergency boxes next to each gun. The cooks had supplied us with another good meal before everyone not on duty went to sleep in whichever corner he had prepared for himself. I frankly admired our kitchen staff for their ingenuity in procuring food for us. And what is more was their making it into tasty dishes and just not the usual army slop.

I was aware, of course, that the various bottles of home made brandy helped in the estimation of our meals, and a little worried about the quantity of alcohol some of the men took. But as long as they were able to walk straight there wasn't much I could do even though I wondered how their reactions would be in case of imminent danger.

It was a clear, warm night and one smelt the spring wafting over from the partly ploughed fields around us. All was quiet as I made my inspection round among the gunners to make sure they were not worrying as Gregl's special task force keeping a protective ring of infantry around guns' emplacement. Occasionally, a burst of rifle fire from a nervous sentry or a round from a machine-gun would ring out but there was no constant battle noise. In the distance, flares went up here and there spreading their brilliant light, but they seemed more like practice shots than the real thing. I chatted for a while with Virag and the other gunners on duty, speculating what would be in store for us all. Where would we be when this war would at last be over? This was our main concern, to which would we surrender, how far would we be from home, still on home territory or already in another country?

It was easy to detect the general fear of falling into the hands of the Russians, What if we went over to the partisans or to the Yugoslav army? Still, so much hate and demand for revenge after four years of suffering must have stored up that it would be difficult for any Croatian to get away alive. On the other hand, we told ourselves, we were a regular army - even if considered as the enemy by the rest of the Yugoslavs - and thus under the protection of the Geneva Convention for Prisoners of War.

It was well after midnight, when a messenger from our commander came to the school with orders to pull out immediately. We were not allowed to use any light, which was simple enough because there was no electricity only the light of kerosene lamps. The few battery-run lamps we had were saved for the needs of the first gunner and the officer on duty. For a time, things were pretty chaotic as soldiers were wakened and started running about tending to their duties. The horses got nervous as they were harnessed in the dark by fumbling fingers and accompanied shouting or the occasional shriek of anger or fear.

I went and stayed close to gun No. 2 as this was the standard practice for the officer in charge. It took only about half an hour to pull the guns from out of their emplacements and put them on their carriages, with the gunners standing by and the riders trying to keep their horses calm. It was still dark when the captain came in his buggy from his quarters in the centre of town, as he had not been staying with us in the school. I hadn't seen much of him during the past days and it had been Vlatko who came to inspections only. We did not

know where he and the commander had been accommodated, but it did not bother us greatly as we were connected with the division command by field telephone. This had been cut off recently which meant that we were really moving.

"Your report, Lieutenant, if you please!" was the first captain's words. He never bothered much about how the guns were placed or whether they were protected, his main concern was to see that the supplies kept coming in and our stores were constantly replenished. For the rest, he depended on Gregl and the two "greenhorns", as two of us the second lieutenants appointed late in 1944, were called.

"First battery is ready to move, as ordered, sir!" My report was as brief as his request for it, but it was the best I could do that early in the morning and not trained in the Croatian language. I had to improvise occasionally which made for clumsy wording sometimes but, by now, I had got used to the captain's sneering remarks.

"Very well! Are the horse-teams properly harnessed? Did you check?" — "All guns are mounted, ammo-carriages loaded and mounted too. Teams were checked last evening and harness left on since then." — "I do hope that the bits haven't been kept on all this time?" - Clearly, the captain wanted to find some fault.

"No, sir, but that's the grooms' responsibility." — "Don't be cheeky, but never mind, I hear you've lost your horse. Take the one of your pal who deserted. Did you know about his plans?" — "No, sir, I considered his last instructions to me as your orders, and acted accordingly."

For the first time, the captain had mentioned Zorko's defection and we would not talk about it again, until after three months. Had the captain's attitude towards me changed a little or did I only imagine so?

"Well, lieutenant, give orders for the battery to move. Guns first, followed by the ammo-carriers in convoy. Gregl will take over the rest of the convoy and put his "special force" as a rear guard. We do not want any more deserters, understood?"

"Yes sir, the battery will move immediately." — "Oh, another one of your composed orders? Isn't it time you used proper commandos, lieutenant?"

"Yes sir! Battery moves forward! March!" — "That's better! Well, get your horse and take care you don't stumble in the dark. We need you with us, you know. No need to rush, and don't make too much noise when marching through town. We're not going far, anyway."

As I walked off I was wondering whether the captain was beginning to be human in his dealings with me. The captain soon left in his buggy. Vlatko I hadn't seen at all, which surprised me. I called in the platoons' and all gun leaders and issued my orders. Gregl watched me from some dark corner and, after I had dismissed the corporals, said: "Sir, you seem to be turning into a professional. Well done! If, you keep an eye on the guns and the ammo-carriers, I'll look after the rest. Don't worry!"

"Fine, sergeant-major. Do me a favour and send the platoon's troop transport carts right after the guns. I'd rather ride with them than ride Zorko's horse which I don't know yet."

"Yes, sir, no problem. The horses are good on both carts. Suggest you keep one each behind this platoon." - This was a good suggestion and I was pleased not to have ridden Zorko's horse, a slightly nervous gelding with high shoulders and not really a riding-horse.

A little later, Virag arrived with his cart and an extra horse named "Kestenko" that was to be my horse. We hitched it to the cart, I got on it and on my command the battery started moving out into the road. It was still dark when we passed through the town centre of Slatina and took the road to the west. Only when we had the town behind us did the first faint light come up in the east. There was nothing to be heard except the crunching of the heavy wheels on the road and the clatter of the horses' hooves, and we thought it strange that we were the only ones moving on this road.

I was sitting very comfortably on a coachman's seat that obviously had belonged to a more luxurious coach than this sturdy peasant cart. All my personal things as well as a collection of light arms, which Virag had assembled and kept well hidden from Gregl's eyes, were stored on this cart. These were together with some food supplies for emergencies. We went through Sladojevci and twice had to cross the railroad tracks, which tended to make the horses nervous. Without a stop we proceeded on to Cabuna, about 17 kilometres from Slatina. It was light by the time we got there and the sky was covered clouds bringing the usual April shower. A little traffic had come up in the road, but still the people of Cabuna stopped and stared as we moved through. A horse drawn howitzer certainly was a sight to any of villagers. Such heavy weapons normally belonged to the German army and were motorized as long as they had the necessary gasoline, at least.

Following our orders, we did not stop at Cabuna either but were told that we would reach our destination shortly. Checking my maps, I saw that we would soon reach one of the major crossroads with the left road leading to Daruvar southeast of the final ridge of the Papuk Mountains. Another crossroads, about 13 kilometres ahead near the town of Virovitica, might be our next emplacement. One of the main roads was running from Virovitica to Barcs in Hungary, but the bridge over the Drava had been destroyed, we were told. Strange that we were closing to the Drava River and came rather close to the range of Russian and Bulgarian artillery, I thought, not to mention the JAKs. How far are the Reds over on the left bank, and why don't they make an attempt to cross over the Drava? Why?

We marched on for another three hours and once again crossed the railway leading to Virovitica, now further off to the left, and soon also passed the junction on our left, which meant we were not going to Pcelic and on to Daruvar further south. I felt it was time to watch out for that menace of the skies - the Russian JAKs. Distances between the guns and the carts should be increased, and for this reason I gave order for the leading platoon to get into a trot and for the riders and the guns' crews to mount. Just as we were gaining speed a messenger came up in a gallop: "Sir, where are you rushing to? There, only a few hundred meters to the left you turn in and up through the gate into that farm over there. You see it?"

There was no time to get on Kestenko whose saddle hadn't been put on, so, with the messenger following our cart. We overtook the first platoon and leading the entire battery from the cart I brought in to a well-kept entrance on our left. We were only a few kilometres from a large village called Suhopolje lying about 2.5km kilometres east of Virovitica.

It was a strange feeling riding into this large farm compound the likes of which I knew from childhood days. Before World War I, such estates had been the source of great wealth, many of them having been owned by old noble families, some Croatian other Hungarian. After 1918, the latter ones had been sold by the owners or were held on lease by a tenant as they lay within the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. These large estates were more or less self-supporting, and one was sure to find a rambling well-built house accommodating the entire family and all permanently employed on the estate, and huge storage rooms, stables and outbuildings. There would be a blacksmith's and a wheelwright's shop and every agricultural machine including steam-driven locomotives sometimes used to produce electricity via a transmission belt and a generator. That only trouble was it usually was of such varying voltage so one preferred the old gas jets or kerosene lamps. There was also a large pool and a fire engine with a manhandled pump in case of fire. Our hearts rejoiced at the thought of all the goodies we would find to replenish our supplies with, and how we would be able to do all our repair work, especially on the shoes of the horses and the wheels of our carts.

"Well, well - look at our lieutenant commanding the battery from a peasant cart. Get down; you are not going any further." - It was Vlatko, standing under the arched gateway to the inner courtyard which was surrounded by a fairly high brick-wall. Vlatko had been sent out by the division command last night to find a suitable place for the battery to be stationed in for the defence of Virovitica, and he had certainly found a good place for us.

"Where can we put the guns?" — "Drive through beyond the rear gate and you'll find a wide flat area where you can place the four guns well apart. There is direct sighting on several church-towers, choose the one you like best for indirect firing, I don't believe that you'll have to go to direct firing this time. Sorry about the other time, at Podgorac!"

Both platoons had arrived in the courtyard by now, so I had to rush my coachman to get in front again. Soft drizzle had started making the surface of the clay-bricks slippery. The rumble of my galloping cart sent chickens scattering in all directions and the dogs started barking. People came rushing out of their houses to see what all the noise was about and stared in astonishment at the bewildering sight of all these soldiers and guns. Soon we were out of the courtyard, downhill through a sort of park and into a wide clearing stretching into open fields beyond. I stopped the cart in front of a small hut used as a lookout post for hunting that allowed excellent sight over the fields and the woods on each side.

I couldn't have asked for a better command post and directed the telecom team to put their equipment in and lay the cables to the place Vlatko had indicated as observer's post. The guns arrived and were placed along the edge of the woods, about 30 meters apart from each other. The gun position was well protected from aerial view, even more so after the crews had built small ramparts around each gun and camouflaged it with branches and tall grasses. The sole disadvantage was that fire direction was possible to the east only. I therefore decided to instruct Virag's platoon, stationed at the upper field, to provide an emergency exit to the top thus enabling the two guns to turn their fire to the south as well. It certainly wasn't the way my German instructors had taught me to position guns - all four in one line, between tree trunks and on different levels - but did it matter?

Nobody seemed to be interested in what I was doing and I knew I was doing my best. When the horse-teams had taken off, I told the observer to locate the battery on the map and direct all guns true east, taking our bearing by a large building in southern direction

which we could also identify on our maps. This time it wasn't going to be a church tower as Vlatko had suggested.

Zorko and I had had our experience with church towers in Osijek. There the battery's observer had been Zorko who viewed from one of the windows of Hotel Royal. The battery orientation sighting was the tower of the cathedral in the Upper town that was Osijek's highest spire. When spotting a sharpshooter on the other bank of the Drava, Zorko ordered gun No. 2 to fire just in the direction battery's orientation point. I warned him of the cathedral spire being in the exact line of fire but Zorko was so intent on his target so he did not heed my warning. The first round went off, and after a few seconds Zorko's nervous voice asked over the field-telephone: "What's up? There's no impact on target. Repeat fire but make sure it's not another dud." - It hadn't been a dud but a first-class shot at the church spire. I wasn't at all surprised to see smoke clouds coming out of it which could be seen from everywhere within the range of 2.5 kilometres. Later, it was found out that the southeast corner of the tower was slightly damaged, and I wondered that no one suspected who had caused it.

At any rate, this time I opted for leaving all church spires well alone and to pick a more "profane" target for sighting. My orderly waited with Kestenko saddled, so I tried my new horse on returning to the courtyard in order to inspect laying of the telephone cable towards the observation post on the far edge of the woods where one had a good view in all directions. There was more traffic in the road we came in now, mostly army convoys going to Virovitica. I noticed this riding on to check whether the command post had been established properly and that it is operational. Later turning back I found, as expected, the main building of the estate that was an old mansion on the further side of a well kept park. The captain had his orderly arranging the accommodations already.

Seeing me arriving captain spoke out: "Welcome to our new residence. My orderly will show you your room in which you will even find a bed, provided the partisans don't find us first."

"Thank you, Sir; I'll come back after I've inspected the guns' emplacements once more." — "Very well. I only hope you won't use that express cart again, which brought you here at such speed that I was afraid you'd run over several people. But no casualties have been reported so far" was the captain's reply.

Outside the house, I found horses hitched to the post but no sign of my orderly. Gregl came up on his sturdy Bosnian horse and reported that he had spread his task force around the tree perimeter and that he had nearly missed the guns because they were so well hidden. Gregl also told me about a road at the bottom of the field and warned me of a large pond in the woods, which might be a fishing pond with marshy soil around.

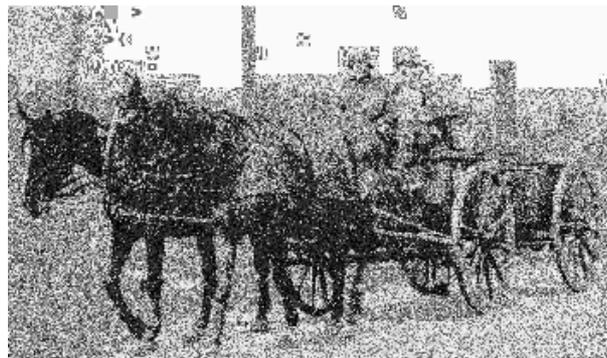
Soon my orderly appeared saying: "Sir, your room is in the attic looking down into the field we came from. Shall I get your things up?" — "No, thanks, not right now but show me where Virag's cart is."

We turned into the main yard where a lot of activity was going on. Our blacksmiths were at work already, and the kitchen funnels blew smoke full blast, which was a good sign, too. I had no doubt that our supply unit was at work already and was combing the estate for all that could be of use to us. Funny, how even I had stopped thinking that this was somebody else's property, but then, the story went that the Reds didn't care much about private

property either, especially if it belonged to the "bourgeoisie". What the hell, this was war - for which I wasn't responsible - and one best is to turn one's mind on setting on with it and staying alive.

The kitchen smells reminded me that I was very hungry. Why go on with this self-imposed inspection tour? Why did I have to get so involved? Out of interest in what I was doing or merely to forget what lay ahead of us? Natural urge for self-preservation is what it was, I decided in the end. After continuing with my inspection round, riding up and down over the hill and into the woods - which in itself was no easy task under the low branches of the trees - I found that I was pleased with my new horse and its sturdy gait. And what, my dear Kestenko, would be our future together?

Back at the mansion, I found my room with my entire luggage waiting for me and to my great surprise was asked by the captain to join him for lunch. I decided that this asked for a shave and encountered another surprise: warm water. There even was enough for a bath in the old bathtub with its copper boiler. What luxury after a week without proper washing! Relaxing in the warm water, with all the dirt of a week washed off my skin, forgetting my troubles and my worries about the uncertain future, I remembered Faust's plea: "Behold, you are so beautiful, oh moment!"



The field kitchen aka "Gulaschkanone" was the best crew's companion.

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