

## 08. FULL RETREAT

**Tuesday, May 1, 1945**

We left Bjelovar at midday, joining the heavy traffic on the main road to Zabno, another important junction, from which one road leads southwest towards Zagreb, another one in north-western direction to the town of Krizevci, one of the major railway stops. The distance between Zabno and Bjelovar is about 22 kilometres. The road runs mainly through a plain except for one steep incline just out of Bjelovar and an equally steep rise when one passes the village of Cirkvena on approaching Zabno.

From the top of the incline outside Bjelovar we saw a dense snake of traffic moving westwards. Mostly peasants in their typical wagons, with cows or horses tied to it, sometimes also goats or sheep. Dogs jumped around this sad exodus of man and beast fleeing before the war machine.

I was riding on Virag's cart following the first platoon with its ammo-carriers. We had split the battery into two parts which could each operate on its own. I was nervous sitting there on the road slowly descending downhill with all these horse teams, guns and carts, and constantly watched the sky for enemy airplanes. I kept thinking of my family and wondering how they were. The strange experience of the night in battle and finding ourselves left alone had made me jumpy.

I simply couldn't understand what had happened when the three of us joined up in fast gallop with the battery retreating towards Veliki Grdjevac. Arriving there, we stopped and I felt like the happiest man on earth when I got down from Kestenko's sweaty back after the 10-kilometer-gallop. All I wanted was a place to rest my weary bones and so I did when finally I found our cart.

Some time later Vlatko came looking for me: "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

I answered rather harshly: "What do you mean by hiding? Where the hell have you been all of last night?"

Vlatko unprepared to my fiendish response said: "Now don't get impertinent. I heard you spent a lot of ammunition. The ammo-carriers sounded pretty empty getting here." — "Well, we were trying to catch some enemy stingers, but why did you leave us up there like sitting ducks? Nobody told us the infantry was retreating and then the telephone went dead just like that. Why? Can you explain to me why?"

"Come on, Zvonko; don't get so angry about it. We learned too late that only German units were outing there at Mali Grdjevac and that our own were placed along the main road. Forget it! You are all back safely and without any casualties. Better get up and take care of the horse teams so we can get moving on to Bjelovar."

What a farce of a commander, I thought, not knowing or caring where he sends his howitzers and not even being able to set up some sort of communication with his men. Insane stupidity! I wasn't going to forget this incident and I knew very well that from now on I would have to look after myself to save my skin. My orderly brought me some food and

drink and that softened my anger somewhat, but I stayed on my cart while overlooking and commandeering the preparations for our departure.

Suddenly, I noticed some commotion further on in the road and saw that a troop of weary soldiers, some of them wounded and in bandages, were making their way through the line of our soldiers. They were prisoners-of-war captured in last night's battles. As I watched them slowly walking past us I wondered how these tired men, wearing more or less the same uniforms, as we did, could be the enemy of only a few hours ago. We spoke the same language, came from the same country, and wore the same uniforms or better non-uniforms of mixed origin.

All of a sudden, I noticed a familiar face among the group of prisoners - it just couldn't be I thought - but it was: "Paul, Paul! Aren't you from downtown Osijek?"

The group stopped their guards somewhat baffled by my shouting. One man turned his face towards me and there truly he was Paul, my mate from Osijek, with whom I had shared four years of secondary school.

Paul was always supposed to be a dangerous companion as he was constantly bragging about working for the Ustasa's secret police (UNS). Nobody really believed it until one day in late 1942 when we were all exercising for choral singing. The teacher had not come in yet and Paul was carrying on as usual and suddenly drew a large pistol out of his jacket pocket. One of the boys took it from him and jokingly asked whether it was for lighting a cigarette. Paul misunderstood the joke and, wrenching the pistol from the boy's hand, fired off one shot.

The noise was terrific to our frightened ears and for a moment, we all stood rigid till one of us had the bright idea to rush over to the organ and started playing it forte fortissimo. Our old professor came in and asked us to be less noisy. He would be with us in a moment but had to have a word with the director before. When the door had closed on his back, Paul proudly produced a card confirming that he was a member of the most dreaded police and entitled to carry a weapon.

Now, he was standing before me looking at me with hopeful eyes as he called out: "Peggy, Peggy! Oh, it's good to see you. Help me to get out of this, please. Aren't you with the First Slavonic Division under Colonel Stier?"

"Sure we are," I said. "But how did you get into this mess?"

It was Paul all right because no one else would have known my childhood nickname, Peggy. It was really the name of our Doberman bitch, which my father walked with past the school every morning and Peggy came to meet me like a good mother when I returned from the school. Being very proud of our dog and her intelligence I would greet her with happy shouts of her name, and thus got my nickname.

I asked the guards where they were taking the prisoners and was told that they were looking for the Division commander. One of them went off to find him and I had a chance to talk to Paul while the rest of the group was waiting near my cart. Paul told me that he had been caught by the Yugoslav army near Slavonski Brod after having left Osijek just a few days before our withdrawal from there. Anybody caught by the army was pressed into service immediately if he was of serviceable age and his hair shorn in a rather peculiar

way with a pair of hair-clippers. Paul was most unhappy about this as he had beautiful blond hair. As a newly recruited soldier he had then received a flask of drinking water and some bread in a pouch, a rifle and a limited amount of bullets, and was sent off to the front.

Further, Paul told me that it was sheer murder using them as "gun fodder", as he called it. Paul was with one of the units attacking Mali Grdjevac last night and trying to cross the river but, according to Paul, it had been a death trap from the very beginning. All their units had suffered heavy casualties, some even killed by political commissars when they tried to run back uphill. All soldiers had been freshly recruited, some without any army training at all. The commissars never went down with their units, but stayed behind to see that all soldiers would go forward as told and if somebody hesitated or tried to turn back, the commissars would fire at him. Paul told me that he had run up and down that "bloody" hill several times before being taken prisoner.

Now, he implored me to send a letter for him to Colonel Stier, which I promised and later on did. I wasn't quite sure whether I could believe his entire story but it didn't matter much to me. I did not really feel great sympathy for him because of his political activities with the secret police. Soon after the guard came back, Paul was taken out of the group of prisoners and walked over to the Division command. I thought I saw Colonel Stier coming to meet him, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't care that much, either. All I wanted was a good rest.

I left my "commanding" front seat shortly after this incident and crept behind on bundled myself in a few blankets at the flat cargo part of the cart. I fell asleep instantly and could not remember when our convoy started moving westwards again. Virag told much later that slept like a hog and didn't want to wake me as nobody has been looking after me at all. I slept through most of the way as from Drijanovac and passing through villages like Bulinac, Patkovac and Prespa.

I woke up when the convoy stopped in the village Zdralovi Sredice. With some surprise I noticed that it was morning already and Virag told me about my long sleep offering me a full bowl of warm, reach soup and large piece of fresh bread. Cooks had enough time to prepare the food during the rather slow march on the way to Bjelovar. During the protracted stop in this village our grooms had all hands full of work with feeding and watering the horses. It got up and went to the nearest house to wash myself at its yard draw-well as good as possible. Refreshed I returned to the cart and enjoyed the meal thoroughly. At last I felt vigorous as my inner strength was returning and started looking for what should I do next for myself first if somebody comes with a new demand for me.

After a while the convoy continued with its slow movement and we had some problems with the other traffic moving the same way. There were mostly peasants with their animals fastened by ropes to the rear of their carts and dogs running between people on foot in silence and with apprehensive mimes. After some time our convoy reached the periphery of Bjelovar town and passed the main square crowded with people and animals like on a market day. For a normal Saturday this would be quite normal but for the considerable number of soldiers that mixed with the crowd now. The Battery stayed at a barracks compound for three days that had to be used to replenish stores and reorganize horse teams taking care for a minimum of discipline too. I haven't seen much of our commander or Vlatko either during this short respite.

On the third since our arrival to Bjelovar our convoy got orders to get ready for further move probably towards Zagreb. We rode down a steep part of the road from Bjelovar leading westwards and passed through a village Predavac. A wood of old oaks ran along to our right for a while as we marched on at a slow pace towards Zabno. All traffic on the road was heading the same way, as was our battery in this swelling retreat. I feared mostly aerial attacks or some unexpected ambush but as time passed nothing had happened. My main objective was to keep the guns well spaced and yet staying together when passing the civilian wagons or people on foot. I had no idea where the rest of our convoy with other supplies was. Where was Gregl's unit, for instance?

There was no sight of the commander so it seemed that Vlatko and I were left as the only officers with the battery now. We passed yet another village of Rovisce, but there was no order to stop or rest. At a junction that we reached by mid afternoon, we were instructed to head for Zabno. I remembered my father telling me about his friend who was in charge of a large farm near Zabno. I wondered whether he would still be there as he was of Jewish origin though married to an Aryan wife, which kept him safe for some time. If he was still there, it might be my last chance to get out of this death marked convoy. The thought occupied my mind all the way to Zabno.

We got there by late afternoon and came upon the T-junction in the town's centre, where a church stood at one side of a large square. To my delight, our convoy turned left into the road leading towards Zagreb, only 60 kilometres away by now. I would not mind getting to Zagreb at all. Zagreb is a large city and the capital of Croatia where I would probably find it much easier to hide until these chaotic days of the ending war were over. But I kept my eyes open in Zabno for a good place to stop and give the horses a rest after this constant march over four hours.

Shortly after we had left the square, I saw a large gate opening into a wide farmyard surrounded by buildings typical for a large estate. I ordered the battery to stop and told the gun leaders to see that their horse teams would get a rest. I left my cart by the roadside and entered through the gate. There was a large building at the right in front of which many soldiers, some of higher ranks, were milling around. The yard sloped down into what seemed to be a large orchard. I wondered whether this could by sheer chance the place I was looking for and let my gaze wander to find someone I could ask.

Seeing stables on the left side of the yard, I went there and found an old woman milking one of the few cows left in the spacious stable. "Good evening, mother. Are you living on this estate?"

"Good evening young man. God blesses you. Do you want some milk?"

I replied politely: "I wouldn't mind, but please tell me who the master of this estate is? Is he alive, and where can I find him?"

"There is no master here. Everybody left taking whatever he or she could carry with him or her and some of our best animals. Those soldiers out there took the rest. They must be very hungry. Here, have some milk."

"Thank you, mother! Please tell me, when your master left, did he have any trouble because of his origin?"

“Oh, you mean the old master, the real master. He left some time ago when they came to take him away. But I don’t know where he’s gone or any of his family. It was many months ago, some time in autumn last year, I’d say. Go on, drink your milk!”

I didn’t really like fresh milk very much because of its intensive smell but I couldn’t very well reject the old woman’s offer. So I drank the milk, returned the cup and left her. I was very dejected with another hope of escape gone. When I got out into the yard, I saw some of Gregl’s men walking down into the orchard carrying their heavy weapons. They were obviously ordered to get into fighting position. I thought it strange not to see a messenger anywhere and thought I’d better get back to my cart and find out if there were any new orders.

I was stopped by the sound of shouting coming from the house. Instantly I recognized the commander’s voice and turned to see what was going on. It was the colonel and some officers I didn’t know who surrounded him. They were all in the uniforms of Ustaska Vojnica. I could see that their discussion was quite heated and made a few hesitant steps in the direction of the group, when Gregl stopped me: “Don’t go near the colonel, sir. There is some confusion as to where the battery should go into position. I overheard them saying that you were supposed to stay at Cirkvena and shouldn’t have come here.”

Flabbergasted I responded: “Damn it! I wish I knew who is giving orders in this outfit but one thing is sure, I didn’t get any orders since we left Bjelovar. I just wish they would make up their minds about what they want to do fast.”

I felt really angry, doubly so I guess because of the disappointment of not finding my father’s friend. To that Gregl nodding replied: “You’re right, sir, of course. The main misunderstanding seems to be about where howitzers should be positioned. The Colonel believes that the guns are best used right at the front line, but otherwise he wants our heavy arms to stick close to him. So we stay here for tonight.”

“Well, I guess they’ll get to us sooner or later. I’m outside on the road to see how we can look after our horse teams.” - I was turning to go when the captain’s voice stopped me: “Hello, lieutenant, good to see you. We’ve been waiting for you for hours! Where have you been?”

I very nearly snapped a nasty reply to my commander about the fact that a battery with four howitzers was hardly something one could easily lose sight of unless one was blind. But I kept my mouth shut thinking of all the traffic on the road and how I, myself, had wondered where the German units had got to after our joint battle against the Yugoslav army. Then I said pleasantly: “Sir, our unit is just outside the gate waiting for orders. We came about half an hour ago, but I saw you talking with the colonel and the other officers and didn’t want to interrupt.”

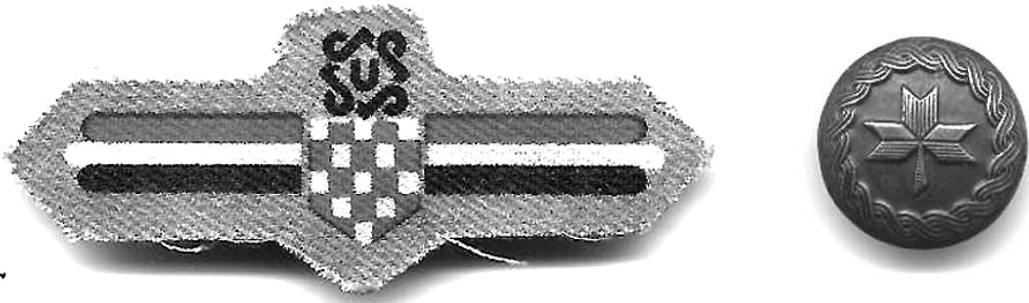
“Good thing you didn’t. These bloody fools wanted us to stay at Cirkvena for the night. Nobody knows where the front is, if it still exists as a clearly defined line or is broken up into occasional skirmishes. Anyway, we’ll stay here for tonight.”

“Can we get the horses into the stables over there?”

“Do whatever you feel is necessary. Gregl’s unit will occupy the orchard and you best place the guns down there too. There are plenty of trees for cover but no need for any

fortification, as we will probably move on tomorrow. Better save your energy, you'll need it. It doesn't look too good!"

What does all this mean; I was asking myself, as I walked back to my platoons to give the necessary orders. We will stay here for the night and we would probably move on tomorrow but then, we might not all! I wish somebody who knew what he was doing when in command and would lead us in a sensible way through this chaotic May of 1945 that had just started.



*At left the insignia of Croatian armed forces (HOS) and a standard knob as from early 1945.*

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