

10. CHAOS OF WITHDRAWAL

Tuesday, May 8, 1945

Our hasty retreat from Cirkvena was almost forgotten when I awoke one beautiful morning. Not knowing where I was until I felt the damp canvas tent I had wrapped myself in when the drizzle started sometime during the night. I had been sleeping at the observation post at forest's edge, which stretched in north-south direction on hills west of Krizevci town. Down in the valley one could see the town with its church and typical town's centre. Six roads were fanning out from it, and a fairly large railway station included some buildings for maintenance and coal storage.

From my observation post, I had an excellent view of the entire valley as well as the railway lines coming in from Zabno and Bjelovar and the mainline from Koprivnica to Zagreb. A few meters downhill, a dust road was leading to Zaistovec, and slightly further uphill a better road was running westward into the Kalnik mountain famous for the battles that had been fought there long time ago and the ruins of castles and fortifications on hill top's places. There were also some thermal spas further northwest of Croatia.

I crept out of my canvas bed and checked with the corporal on duty if anything had occurred during the night. He reported that there was hardly any traffic on the roads and that no train had left in the direction of Zagreb since he had taken over at first dawn. Strangely enough, for the past two days we had also seen nothing on the road coming from the east. It seemed as if there was a break in the great move toward the west. We had fired several times and have used up most of the Italian grenades the day before. To our relief, I must say, because we were never sure when they would explode. The firing had been directed by some command post in town at maximum distance of 7500 meters, and we had had a few complaints from division command.

The number of workable horses had also come down considerably due to general exhaustion or injuries that the Vet could not treat with the medicines on hand. I wasn't sure but it seemed to me as if the number of soldier was decreasing too, but then, so many of Gregl's men had been ordered to stay with the colonel or the division command post wherever that was. The battery had more or less dwindled down to an artillery unit though the captain was with us now most of the time. Vlatko was still liaison officer between the division command and us and had been seen in town several times but never stayed with our unit.

I was trying very hard to get information about the front and the general development of the war. There were rumours that Austria was almost completely occupied by the Russians but nobody knew how far their army had progressed to the West. From a conversation between the captain and Vlatko, I learned that the Croatian government and army were planning to withdraw westward in order to surrender to the Americans or the British troops, whoever would be first crossing into Slovenia. I had heard of several attempts to arrange a separate armistice with the Allied Forces and to open the Dalmatian or Istrian coast as a new front thus preventing the Russians from entering Croatia.

There had been an unsuccessful coup d'etat by the general Vokic as Minister of defence and Minister Lorkovic last autumn just before we had returned from our training in Stockerau. Their attempt was without any chance for success and of any consequence as

political developments in Yugoslavia went quite a different way. On the Poglavnik's Pavelic order the whole affair ended rather tragically for both of them. But would this attempt tip the scales in our favour when we met the Americans or the British? And where would we meet them, and when? Would we be able to fight our way out of our present situation and surrender to the enemy we liked to see as the best?

In the barracks our German instructors had taken all our arms though we had them for training purposes only and we did not possess any sharp ammunition in any case. But they came one day and took away our rifles and bayonets and a few days later, all training stopped completely. We had to return everything we had received from the German army at the beginning of our training course. As we had arrived in our civilian clothes it would be quite embarrassing for the Domobran command to have future officers run around in shabby civvies. Soon we were given some odd assortment of garments and pieces of Domobran like uniform that we had to put on.

All these thoughts and contemplation, however, waned as soon as we were faced with our daily battle with the trivialities of life such as going to the toilet and washing oneself. I hated the lack of hygiene life on the road involved and the prickly feeling I had all over my skin from dust and sweat and dirty underwear. But soon I stopped shaving and simply gave in to this way of life, washing whenever it was possible but not making a great point of it. Now I was walking through the forest towards the farm, where the captain had his quarters and his command post. The guns had been placed this side of the road leading to Orehovac west of Krizevci. Our horses were kept in the stables as far as possible, the rest out in the open. Our Vet was with them and quite busy with all the injuries occurred in the course of our flight to the fields from the Russian JAK.

After that incident at Cirkvena we had been marching almost the entire night although the distance from Zabno to Krizevci was not much more than 11 kilometres. But the road was so congested we could move only slowly in this sinister exodus through dark of the night. I had been able to doze some of the time sitting on my cart, preferring not to think what would happen if the partisans should attack us. After that long and arduous trek arriving in Krizevci had come as a relief though quite a few of the men were nagging about the fact that we were not moving on to Zagreb. In addition, every one of us felt sure that the enemy knew where our guns were positioned all though we had done our best to hide them. We had been warned about enemy informants mingling with the Domobrants and we knew that the Ustasas did not consider us very reliable, as so many of the Domobrants - sometimes complete units - had deserted fully armed to the partisans now representing the new Yugoslav Army.

But why do I worry about such things? I asked myself. Better try to get some food. The cooks had set up their mobile kitchen inside the farm grounds and to my delight I found, that they had some food ready including freshly baked bread. I really admired them for the way they kept us fed in such difficult circumstances. But they were professionals in every respect, in cooking and in getting supplies, most of which were pillaged, of course.

"Sir! Here please, have some fresh coffee. It may well be the last we'll get."

"Who said so? Has anyone been in town and heard some news?" I asked the chief cook after taking the coffee and bread he had offered me.

"Oh, well, sir - you know the rumours that go around. But the captain has left in his cart a little while ago and he might bring some news. We've heard of an armistice."

That certainly was good news if it was true. An armistice while still on Croatian territory was the best thing that could happen to us. Still, as it was I got my ration for the day and returned to the observation post. There, I found several of the corporals and platoon leaders including Virag. They were all watching through field glasses for anything happening in the valley. So far, all was quiet, even railway traffic had ceased completely and there was no movement at the railway depots either.



The "Rail wolf" pulled by a locomotive rips the rail sleepers like matches.

Sometime during the morning a single locomotive appeared from the direction of Zagreb. It was belching smoke and working as if under full load though it did not have anything to pull but an ominous black shaped monster bigger than the engine itself. As it came closer we heard the rattling noise of the black monster which looked like a giant hoe and was tearing up the ties between the rails. As it advanced, we saw how the rails were slightly lifted and then fell back with some of the ties sticking to them. So that was the end of the railway line to Zagreb, and it probably meant that we wouldn't go that way anymore either. As the destruction machine had reached the railway station it was clear to us that from now on road transport would be the only way to get out of Krizevci. I was aware of that the roads would be very congested from now on. But where are we supposed to be going, anyway?

"Sir, look over there. See the forest beyond the town!"

"Get the guns ready for combat!" I turned my attention to the typical puffs of smoke above the treetops coming from the explosion of mortar grenades. Soon we heard the sound of explosions and gathered that some fighting was going on along the road from Zabno. Only minutes later we noticed a rider galloping along the edge of the forest from where I had come some hours ago.

"Sir, here is the order to concentrate your fire into that wood along the road from Zabno. Fire at the maximum distance. Do it at your discretion as a disturbance firing at irregular intervals."

That was a pretty funny order but as we still had some of that unreliable Italian ammunition I gave order to use those grenades first. We started an erratic firing at some imaginary target and in many cases didn't even see the impact of our shots. Hours passed with this strange but deadly game and it seemed to have some effect, as after a while we did not hear any firing down below. The black monster had continued its destruction work undisturbed and after completing its task had disappeared in the direction of Koprivnica. Noon passed without any break for lunch as we carried on with our "disturbance fire" at an invisible enemy.

We were all so busy that we did not notice the increasing traffic on the road behind us. It must have been mid afternoon when the order came to stop firing. It was Virag who informed me that the commander had told us to stop our racket immediately and get ready to pack up. What a strange way to issue orders, I had thought, but couldn't get any clarification when I tried to find out whether we were supposed to withdraw from our post. After a while, I decided to go myself and find out what was going on, leaving one corporal and a telecom man with our equipment. I made my way through the wood with great caution and when turning round the edge on the level where our guns had been placed, I was startled by what I saw.

All the horse teams had been assembled to pull out the guns and the ammo-carriers seemed to have left already. There was an air of urgency and nervousness about the scene that had infected the men as well as the horses. Obviously, everybody was in a hurry to get away. As I came closer to the farm where I had had my last warm meal about twelve hours ago, I could see that I was right. Those bastards, they really didn't care about anyone but themselves. They were going to leave us up there at the observation post just as before.

The first corporal I came across felt my wrath and I shouted at him: "Who gave order to pull the guns out? Who issues orders without notifying the observation post?"

"Sorry, sir, it was the captain himself, who came in a great hurry and told us to pack."

"Where is Virag? How long ago were you told to get out of here?" Without waiting for an answer, I rushed over to the second gun and found Virag with the rest of the gun leaders in heated debate so that they did not notice my approach. I was in such a foul mood I must have looked ready for murder carrying my automatic aimed straight at the men.

"What the hell is going on? What was your last order? And who was in charge of keeping the observation post informed? You fucking lot would have left us in the lurch again. Cowards, bastards..." I was sputtering in my fury.

"Sir, sir, please calm down. We weren't going to leave you behind. Please believe us. Don't blame us, but the commander who did not think about sending you an order. We were so excited when we heard we were getting out of here."

"Virag, this is the third time it happened and, by God, it will be the last time! All of you remember who was in command of firing! And now get those two men at the observation post to come here, and fast!"

I was drenched in perspiration from the excitement and only now did I notice that I had aimed my weapon at my own comrades. What has come over me? What is happening to

me? What will happen to all of us? It seemed as if everything was falling apart, we were running in circles unable to decide where to go and to whom to surrender. Did we have any chance at all to reach the American or the British Army out there?

I turned and took a few steps to the side to try and calm myself. No use in blaming the men for the mistakes and omissions of slack commanders. We were all in the same boat, pushed into this whirlpool of events outside our command. Some inner voice was telling me that I had to get some sort of order into this general confusion or we would all be flushed away on the oncoming tide of a general retreat. That it had started was beyond any doubt as I looked at the congested road leading westward from Krizevci. I couldn't see whether the same chaos reigned on the road leading northwards but I was quite sure that there wouldn't be anyone going south towards Zagreb. Was the city abandoned already? If Zagreb had fallen there went my last hope of finding a hiding place.

I do not remember what made me order to get the battery organized as tight as possible but I felt that as long as we had our horse teams and enough arms to fight our way out, we had a chance to come through. Keep the battery together with a few convoy carts full of supplies and feed for the horses and take as much ammunition with as you can carry. And get the guns in front, quickly! My groom had Kestenko ready for me and I mounted it an unusual vigour.

With every order I gave my head became clearer and calm thinking returned. The sun was setting by the time all four guns were ready to move into the road leading to Kalnicko Gorje that was quite full of traffic already. I felt exhausted riding up and down the lines on Kestenko's sweat drenched back, but it was worth the effort to have a group together representing a certain force and military strength.

All the time while, I was manoeuvring the battery into some sort of marching order there was no sign of the captain or Vlatko or any other officer. Where were they and where was Gregl's special task force? I wondered but knew at the same time that they would probably have to keep close to the colonel's command post.

Suddenly, from the farm at our right, I saw the commander's cart followed by the main convoy move out into the road. They had difficulty getting into the general traffic so I decided to get the battery moving as soon as I could see a chance. With our horse teams of course it was much easier to break in and widen the gap, and just as we were about to move in from the left the captain's driver saw his chance and squeezed in from the right.

Ah, well, let the captain ride in front of the battery. I've preferred staying at the rear with the battery's battle convoy anyway, especially as Virag has tried his best to make up for all that had happened. He even served me a hot meal, when I dismounted Kestenko and continued riding on the cart for a while.

It was getting dark. We were moving slowly but steadily in westward direction on a road going uphill and winding constantly, as far as one could gather from the first few kilometres after our start. And so started the exodus of the Croatian army and population in this dark night of May 8th into May 9th, in the year of 1945!

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