

06. OXEN ON BILOGORA HILLS

Wednesday, April 25, 1945

It had been raining slightly ever since we left our encampment at the estate last night. The departure had come rather unexpectedly, as in the past five days we could not detect any enemy action or could we find out where the front line was and therefore had settled into some kind of peaceful routine. We did notice a certain amount of traffic on the main road including a considerable number of German troops moving westward. But nothing dramatic had happened and we did not have to fire a single shot from our well-concealed guns. We had used the time for form new horse teams and to exchange some of our carts for the flat ones with rubber tires on wheels that were leftovers of various army vehicles. The ammunition boxes as well as Gregl's arms collection was distributed more evenly to provide better cover against any form of assault. The order to leave came in the late afternoon, giving us time to pack as many supplies as we could get hold of and the night was falling when we left the estate now looking rather squeezed out or better to say looted.

We passed through the town of Virovitica and without stopping proceeded along the main road towards Pitomaca. To my surprise, we were marching along south banks of Drava, the other side of which was held by the enemy. Then we heard rumours that the Russian army was already deep into Austria, which meant that they had proceeded much faster towards the West than the Yugoslav army down here. At midnight, we made a stop at a small timber-town called Spisic Bukovica, lying at the foot of the hilly area of Bilogora Hills Mountain range. Again, I knew this area from my father's tales of long hikes he had made with friends through fields and forest, sleeping in the open or the peasants' barns.

"Sir, captain's orders are for you to stay put for a while and let the convoy pass, with sergeant Gregl's unit to be in front of the battery." This was captain's runner to whom I replied instantly: "Very well. Inform the captain that it will take about an hour to water the horses and check their harnesses. All ammunition loaded on flat carts is to go with Gregl's unit."

"Understood! But Sir, I wouldn't take too long stopping here. We are rather close to the Drava. We are moving onwards to Pitomaca and there is no infantry to provide cover for the battery." Runner's advice may have been well meant but it was good to have a rest after this 20-kilometer-march that I spent on my "command cart" as it was known by now. Everything around us was damp and whatever one touched it was wet and slimy from the fine dust of the road mixed the wetness of rain. The leather things and heavy horse blankets smelled of mildew.

This order and the somewhat disturbing news brought by the commander's corporal made caused certain nervousness among the soldiers and gunmen standing around chatting while the grooms looked after the horses. All the shouting and cursing that was heard in the darkness from people one did not see made it all a rather lurid scene.

As soon as the convoy had passed, I gave orders for the battery to follow and soon we went through the village of Gradec without any incident. We were very close to the Drava River now, wondering whether the Bulgarians had any armoured trains aiming their guns at us on the other side. Time was dragging till we reached Pitomaca at about two in the morning. There was no messenger waiting for us, so we continued on to Kladare and

Klostar about 8 kilometres further on. It was still dark when we entered Klostar, from where there are several roads leading in various directions, as well as a railway junction leading west to Koprivnica and south to Bjelovar.

Suddenly there was a commotion in front as our own troopers were coming towards us. We stopped at the right side of the village road waiting for news from the front. No firing was to be heard but a lot of shouting and cursing woke the first lights in the sleeping village. Soon, early morning rays came out and lit a scene of absolute chaos: soldiers, horses, ammunition carriers and guns all milling around the cramped space of the small village. Our battle part of the convoy was still moving in the direction that other units were coming from.

"Lieutenant, turn right back to where you came from. We are returning to Pitomaca and moving on southward to Velika Pisanica from there. Those are the orders." Captain's voice came from his buggy in early morning twilight. - "Very well, sir, but is there a wider place in front for the guns to turn around? It's hardly possible to make it here."

"Don't ask questions, do as you're told!" - Typically it was the captain in command issuing such difficult orders of turning around the six-horse-teams attached to a gun in a rather limited space of a village road. And why had we landed here in the first place?

Rumour had it that some road signs had been turned, leading us in the wrong direction out of Pitomaca. But it didn't matter much to me with my blood boiling at the futility of it all. "First platoon - another 200 meters forward and stop!" I bellowed and shouted: "And allow for security distances. Dismount and detach guns first. Shaft horses to turn carriers and guns for 180 degrees. Proceed instantly!"

I was astonished at my energetic sound of voice but Virag and the other corporals were rushing towards me to check whether they had heard correctly. To detach the guns in the middle of a village road was no small feat.

"Sir, are we to leave the guns in the middle of the road? What about the front pair of horses?" to that I replied nervously: "How the hell do you want to turn a gun in such cramped space, otherwise? Detach the ropes of the front two pairs as soon as you have enough room between the guns and the ammo-carriers. Find a way and do it as we've got to go back in the direction we came from. On your feet and walk!"

With the gun manoeuvre in full swing, Gregl came by swearing on top of his voice: "These stupid bastards won't even see a ditch if it's right in front of their eyes. Watch it with your guns, one of the ammo-carriers overturned. Those sleepy bastards!"

In spite of it all, we managed to spread out enough so that all guns could be detached and turned around. The ammo-carriers nearly could do it while standing in place because of their independent wheels. Part of the convoy was already on its way back while some of the other carts were still turning. My orders were carried out without much grumbling as I clearly had made the best decision.

Virag came up to me: "My compliments, sir. Shall I see that all carts and ammo-carriers follow the guns?" — "Yes, Virag, but it won't be easy to turn the carriers. Take the front shaft and insert it in the rear to keep the balance."

In less than half an hour, we were back on our way to Pitomaca, with only a few of the convoy carts still struggling to turn. But that was none of our business! The morning sun was out but greatly reduced by low clouds and mist, as we made our way into the Bilogora hill mountain slopes. The road was a bit slippery after all the rain but we were the only ones on this backwater track which now became steeper so that the convoy had to conquer one sharp turn after the other.

Soon our battle-convoy was stretched out from one hill to the next. Far in front, the scouts and troopers followed by the captain's car and the convoy carts. The horses started to get tired lifting their hooves with difficulty in the muddy road-surface. It became increasingly difficult to keep the guns moving. I ordered the gunmen to assist the riders in keeping the horses reigned in so that they would pull with equal strength. I, too, had trouble to move my legs, at times having to pull my boot out of the mud with both my hands. I was tired and hungry and very far from the kitchen wagon and its supplies.

When I saw one of the riders whipping a horse mercilessly, I had to rush up and stop him, but I could understand his frustration and fury at our slow progress. As we came round another right turn we saw a small village on top of the next ridge. Examining it through my field glasses I could see that this was our goal. The front of the convoy had already reached the ridge but we had a right turn and another left turn still ahead us, not more than a few hundred meters difference in height but very steep. And this became our undoing.

The first gun was stuck in the mud just a few meters clear of the turn. The horses simply couldn't move the weight with their hooves deep in mud. There was no proper support in a ground that had been turned into mire by the passing convoy, so that one even didn't see a footprint or mark of hooves. No point in whipping or shouting or cursing so we would have to push these heavy bastards of a gun up the hill ourselves. Curse the bloody stupid so and so who had thought this out!

"Battery full stop. Platoon leaders in front." - My command did not sound too strong in this wide-open space but then, it wasn't necessary either, as all movement had stopped by now. It took us a while to get together and figure out how to pull out the mud-bound guns and allow the rest of the convoy to get up the hill. The road was narrow, with a decline on the right and a grassy slope on the left. In addition, we were rather exposed to any sniper watching us from his hiding place. The only good thing was that the drizzle had stopped and that the sun would be coming out of the mist soon.

"Let us try to get two teams together to pull out a gun, with all gunmen pushing." - It was a sound suggestion but anyone who has ever handled a six-team of horses will know that another team in front does not increase the pull to twice the strength. Another important fact is, that once a horse-team is discouraged it is very difficult to get it to make another attempt, and our horses had been covering almost 60 kilometres with their heavy load in the past fifteen hours!

"Get the shovels and move some of that muck around the wheels. Then lay boards and poles under the wheels. Cut rills across the road surface to drain the water. Get one detachment up that hill to give us cover and watch out for airplanes. Virag, you get Kestenko and inform the company commander about our situation. Hurry up, get going!"

I had forgotten my fatigue and hunger as I pulled one leg after the other in the heavy mud, thanking my good fortune that the boots were at least watertight and wouldn't provide me

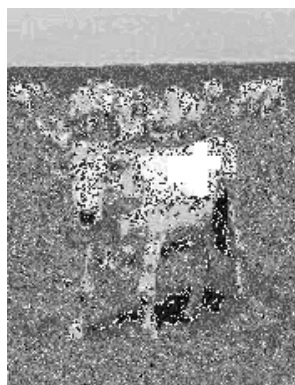
with the doubtful pleasure of squelching water between my toes. It was getting warmer and with a bit of luck the sun would dry out the road allowing us to move on.

But fate was with us, that day! It sent us a pair of those strong white oxen with long horns that are used to pull heavy loads, harnessed together by a twin yoke made of wood and resting on their massive necks. A shaft was fastened with the help of a huge pin at the middle of the yoke, and with their slow and steady pull these oxen were able to pull a weight exceeding anything a team of six horses could do.

It was Gregl who came to our rescue with this pair of white beasts coming towards us with their slow, majestic gait. - "Hello, lieutenant! I could see you're in trouble from up the hill. Told Vlatko you wouldn't make it through this muck, but they wouldn't listen to me. Cheer up, there's another pair of these giants coming to help you. And in the meantime, you can rest and water the horses at a pool nearby."

Noon passed, the sun came out and dried the mud and four pairs of oxen managed the heavy work in a matter of a few hours. Once the shafts were adjusted to the twin-yoke, one ox was put under each side of the yoke and a long pin closed to fasten the yoke. With another pair, they then started pulling the heavy ropes tied to the guns and ammo-carriers. Watching the slow, heavy movement of the oxen it seemed as if they did not have much trouble getting their terrible load out of the mud, but seeing their long horns vibrating as their necks and shoulders strained one could imagine their enormous effort. Four times, the two pairs of white oxen had to go down and up with their load and came up to the ridge in the end. We were all full of admiration for these strong and beautiful beasts, which the heaven had sent us in our hour of need and we had hoped that they would get their just reward with a double load of fodder.

When we reached the place exhausted and splattered with mud where the convoy was waiting for us with food for our hungry stomachs and that of the horses. A nearby brook provided some water for refreshing and cleaning ourselves, and soon our spirits rose. We were close to Velika Pisanica and protected by a forest from the enemy's view.



The Hungarian Longhorn Oxen are grazing peacefully here.

* * * * *