

07. BATTLES IN THE NIGHT

April 27 and 28, 1945

After our ordeal on Wednesday night crossing the Bilogora ridge, we spent a night in the open, in a peaceful place in the young forest with soft, mossy ground. We managed to hide so well that no one could imagine a complete battery with one hundred horses and about twice as many soldiers resting in that place. Sentries were placed all around but we did not know in which direction to aim the guns, so we left them camouflaged with shrubs and branches by the roadside. Only the carts and ammo-carriers were pulled into the woods and hidden together with the horses which had been fed and groomed and were tied to the trees, with their soft noises disturbing the quiet of the spring night.

No troop movements could be detected the next morning on the road we had come on the day before. Around mid morning, the captain returned from Velika Pisanica and gave orders to get ready for marching on. We passed through Pisanica around lunchtime and soon came onto a better road leading towards the junction of Veliki Zdenci. We were discussing among ourselves which way we would be turning, as there was no indication as to where the enemy was placed or in which direction the front was forming. At the road junction, we saw a few convoys and civilians moving westward towards Bjelovar, but there were also troops of soldiers marching in the opposite direction. Some were Domobran units but there were others with the insignia of the Ustaska Vojnica and some German units in the bluish uniforms of the First Luftwaffe Division that had withdrawn from Greece a few months ago and were now fighting as infantry, poor chaps.

We turned east and came to Veliki Grdjevac with the guns in front and the convoy following. Veliki Grdjevac is a village stretching along the road for so long it feels as if there were no end to this settlement. The road became less congested and we had the feeling that we must be approaching the front. We were on the south side of the Bilogora Hills with a plain spreading south to the rivers of Grdjevica and Cesma. We stopped at Veliki Grdjevac when it was still light and went to find a place to stay for the night. I preferred to stay close to the horses and our supplies, finding this a place most secure when I was not on duty. But it wasn't to be a quiet night and just before dawn on Friday, orders came for the battery to get into battle position. I was in command at the time, as neither the captain nor Vlatko had stayed with us for the night.

We moved into the south flank of the Bilogora Hills, about 11 kilometres slightly uphill towards Mali Grdjevac. As far as I could see on my special map of the area, it was a dead-end road. I remember riding Kestenko, followed by a corporal and my orderly with field gear and becoming very melancholy at the thought of having to fight in these beautiful surroundings on this warm and peaceful day. What did it mean that the rest of the convoy stayed behind and only the battle units were going to Mali Grdjevac?

The village turned out to be small and spreading out on the Bilogora south slope covered with forest as far as one could see. Vlatko was waiting for us at the village church and passed on the order for the four guns to go into battle position amidst the farm buildings and orchards surrounding the village. The got into position and aimed the guns due south, took the horses into the nearby stables and started to wait.

Soon after lunch, Vlatko came from the observation post and told me that I was to go there for the night watch. - "It's a good chance for you to prove yourself as an observer. Remember what happened in Osijek." — "Oh, come on, don't start with that stupid story again," I said: "Everybody knew that the observation post was in the fire brigade's tower."

"Yes, yes, alright, don't think about it now. Get to the observation post and check the telephone line on your way. My corporal will come with you. He knows the place. Take light arms and the field glasses, you might be there all night. And watch out, we noticed quite a few infantry moving in the direction of the front."

Vlatko seemed happy to pass on this order to me. Could it mean something nasty? Riding out of the village on the track sloping down to the river, I noticed that the infantry had taken up various positions in the village, digging trenches in gardens and orchards with heavy infantry arms aiming south. I checked the telephone line making sure that it was safe and invisible as it was our only lifeline with the guns. Then the corporal took us into an orchard behind the house where we dismounted and went on foot, straight into the woods just behind the orchard. The trees of fir, elm and beech, were rather close together but the undergrowth was not too dense which made it easy to lay the telephone line and place its markers.

It was mid afternoon when we reached the southern edge of the forest. Leaving the horses behind, we cautiously approached a place allowing a view down into the valley of Grdjevica stream. Though one could not see the river because of an incline, I reckoned that it must be less than a few hundred meters away. Vlatko's corporal told me that infantry posts were placed on both sides of the promontory we were standing on. Across from us, we saw a plain and a church tower which I could identify on my map as belonging to the village of Velika Barna, This gave us the means for quick orientation and we therefore found a suitable place and set up our strong field glasses for telemetry.

The observation post consisted of a narrow trench next to a large beech tree and, after we had camouflaged it properly, I ordered another trench to be dug about ten meters behind the first one in order to have more room. Three of us remained a corporal, a signaller and I. After I had sent the orderly off to take our horses to a farmhouse we had passed on the way. Telephone contact with the battery went all right and the howitzers were directed toward the church of Barna.

Once I settled down, I noticed that we were not alone in our cosy place; obviously the forest was a sort of defence line. Just as I was contemplating a reconnaissance trip to find out what was going on around us, I noticed some movement in the plain about 1200 meters away, and decided to contact the battery.

"Hawk calling duck, Hawk calling duck, over." - It was a day where the code consisted of birds' names. - "Duck here. What's going on? Did you make any contact with your wings? Over." — "No contact as yet but prey moving towards us. All ready for hunt? Over?" — "Duck ready for hunt but wait for wings to move towards prey. Use your discretion. Over."

I thought it strange that no one from the infantry units so close around us came to see us, but then concentrated on the enemy now slowly closing in on a track that might be a short cut from Barna to Grdjevica over the river. I wondered whether there was a bridge somewhere down there.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the opposite slope, when suddenly the figures there started to move faster, running in a widely stretched line of some hundred meters. I was observing an infantry attack by the enemy for the first time and felt a strange excitement at the idea. We heard only a few shots here and there from the other side but on our side it was very quiet. But not for long! The first enemy line was moving down and out of my sight when heavy machine guns started bellowing somewhere in front of me. Grenades exploded into the attacking ranks and made me aware that some heavy artillery must be nearby as we heard the high whining sound of the grenades.

"Hawk to duck. Second gun distance 3600, angle 240, fourth charge. Report ready."

"Duck to hawk, second gun ready to fire!" — "Fire!" I had to give this order now to get proper bearing before darkness would make all orientation more difficult. I had aimed our fire into the centre of the attacking infantry line, but the distance had been measured on the map. A few seconds later the smoke showed me that the shot had been too far though correct in direction. As far as I could see, the attacking line had come to a halt.

"Distance 3000, angle and charge same, one volley all guns! Fire!" — "Duck to hawk. Command understood but repeat distance. Over." — "Don't argue but fire! Fire!" I shouted knowing that I was supposed to change first to 3200 meters again with the second gun before ordering a volley. But there was no time to be wasted and my hunting instinct told me I was right in my judgment. Soon after my order to fire, we saw the four grenades exploding over the running battle down below.

"Hawk to duck. Get your barrels more parallel for next shot. Stand by for firing command." The line of attackers was breaking up and starting to retreat uphill as abruptly as it had started. The firing stopped. The last rays of the setting sun fell on the scene opposite us where the stretcher-bearers were looking after the wounded. So this was war. I admired the courage of the corpsmen trying to work fast and efficiently out there, right in the open line of enemy fire. But our firing stopped there was humanity still in our thinking.

But there was no time for contemplation as within thirty minutes the enemy started a second attack. Obviously this was the only way to get across the river. The attack came in much the same pattern as the first but these time out machine guns waited a little longer, as it seemed, with their fire. Then whizzed the grenades overhead, well placed and causing havoc among the enemy infantry. The observer of this artillery must be close or their fire could not have been so accurate.

"Hawk to duck. Get all guns ready according to last command. Report ready." — "Duck to hawk. Eggs are ready." — "Fire volley!" Again we followed the whiz and fall of our grenades and this time they exploded right amid the attackers. The attack stopped so abruptly, I did not have time to issue another volley to be fired.

"Duck to hawk. Report battle progress. Over." — "Second attack by enemy infantry. Seems they have no heavy weapons. But stand by for next wave, they will not give in easily it seems. Mark last command as reference for sighting. Over."

Again, we saw the stretcher-bearers busy in their first aid efforts. I wondered whether we could expect the same help on our side or whether all we could do was run. But run where, and for how long before we would be caught?

Out of the darkness between the trees an officer came walking toward us. It was a German captain to see who we were, and he was quite surprised when I answered in German explaining our position. The officer then told me, that he had several mortar batteries of 80 and 100mm placed somewhere to our left in addition to the German infantry guns with short barrels that we had heard from the left just below us. He didn't know which troops lay over to the right but I assumed they would be our units. We stood there for a short while, chatting, when suddenly the officer took out a cigarette and lit it. I was absolutely stunned, expecting a bullet or other charges any moment but nothing happened. The smell of the German's cigarette mingled with the smell of explosion and gunpowder wafting up on a light breeze from below.

The officer then asked me my rank and battle experience, and I guess he felt sorry for me when he heard how green I was. He tried to put me at ease telling me that he had been fighting in Greece and that the Germans were now attempting to withdraw as far as possible towards Austria, into which the American and British armies were advancing from Northern Italy and Bavaria. He also told me that the Russians had taken Vienna over a week ago but that an "Alp Fortress" was preventing them from advancing further west. There might still be a chance for us to get to the Americans or the British. His cigarette was still glowing when the first explosion tore into the silence around us. It was a launched grenade exploding in front of us but the direction was too accurate to be a coincidence. The match he had lit his cigarette with was still glowing, oh, how stupid! I ran for cover before the thought had settled. I never saw the German officer again, but his cigarette cost us a very bad night.

Another grenade came soon and much closer, and the next one hit the crown of the tree under which I was lying. The noise was deafening and my ears were ringing. I strapped my helmet tight and waited for the next impact. Several more grenades exploded around us when in the light of flare rockets another attack was launched. That time, it was directed more to the left and the noise of the battle was so fierce I had to shout into the mouthpiece of my field telephone to make my command heard. This time, I also needed more than one shot to get the guns on target, and again, there was time for one volley only. After about fifteen minutes the attack died out into single rifle shots.

It was getting chilly, so I put on my heavy coat and tried to find a comfortable position in the narrow trench amid the dry branches and twigs. Slowly the deafness in my ears subsided and I could hear the cracking noise of a breaking branch when one of my men moved. I was hungry and thirsty but there was no chance to get anything because after a little while a new barrage of shells started and by 10 PM grenades were exploding all around us. The worst, strangely enough, were those exploding in the top branches of the trees causing a shower of shrapnel coming down on us. The explosions were deafening and I was gasping like a fish out of water to ease the pressure on my eardrums. My instinct for self-preservation made me remember advice I had been given during my training.

"Look out for muzzle fire," was one thing coming to my mind. But this is easier said than done, particularly if a mobile mortar, which was called "Stalin Organ", carries out the attack. We were not able to fire one single shot during this third attack but when half an hour later another wave started I was able to locate the muzzle glow before the grenade exploded somewhere near us. I quickly gave the new sighting but did not see whether we hit anything because we had to duck for cover when a third and fourth volley of grenades came charging at us.



The helmet (German type) carried by soldiers in most of the Croatian army units.

The infantry was fighting again down in the valley that was lit by a constant blast of flare rockets and bullet tracers. The volley from our howitzers came too late, the enemy's gun or mortar had moved away and one could see the stretcher-bearers doing their job as the light of the flares was slowly dying out. I decided it was no use chasing a "Stalin organ" around in the dark wasting ammunition.

"Hawk to duck. Who is in command there? Over." - "What are you doing up there, hawk? Will you keep us up all night?" It was Virag's voice and I cut our conversation short by forgetting all formalities.

"Somebody else is keeping us awake but you better get ready for the next command to act more rapidly. And, I mean it, rapidly by hell! Put Number One on separate firing order, all others to answer original command. Over."

"Are you telling us to split fire?" - "Yes, and you better stick to it. Here we go again! First gun: distance 3800, angle 320. Charge, fire and report!"

This time, I heard our grenade whiz by shortly after the first round of enemy fire exploded more to the left, probably directed on the German trench mortar that was firing away as another attack advanced towards the river. Their shots were well placed as far as I could judge, from the distance and with all the noise and turmoil going on around us, let alone the constant change from darkness into bright lit scene when the tracers and flares exploded. I felt a strange exhilaration of hunting and being hunted, remembering my first experience as an observer in Osijek.

The observation post was at the top of the fire brigade's watchtower, which rose above the surrounding buildings and enabled the watchman to see any fire within seconds. From this particular tower we had a good view of the Drava's left bank where the enemy was installed in some bunkers built into the dike. One of the bunkers was briefly occupied by a team of snipers, and if the observer was fast in giving orders he could direct our fire to the spot immediately after shots had come from there. It was a real hunting game, with bullets whizzing around the tower like flies. In the tower itself, one was quite safe but one had to be careful when going up and down the steep steps inside the tower and passing the various windows.

Once, when on duty, I did a really stupid thing. I permitted one of my father's clients to come up into the tower with me so that he could see what was happening on his farm just behind the dike. Of course, the commander got wind of it and I was reprimanded sharply. The observer post was moved to a hotel in town and I was ordered not to go near it, ever. But when I was sent out to chase the snipers from their hiding places I usually went up on the fire brigade tower again.

The corporal woke me from my memories. Down below, near the river, the battle had settled into a sort of routine, a bloody, useless routine, I thought, watching the stretcher bearers doing their best to help the sorry mess of human flesh torn open by the war machines.

"Here, sir! Take a good sip, you'll need it". - The orderly brought some food and drink for us. Then he said: "It's nearly midnight but the Reds will keep on with their attacks as long as they can replace their casualties." I was grateful for the respite offered and asked the corporal to take over. Virag was on duty with the howitzers and he knew exactly what to do, so I felt no qualms about leaving my post for a moment.

What a night! I was thinking as I crawled back to safety. Whoosh, whoosh, a short blast came so close that I stayed pressed to the ground mesmerized by this new sound and sharp explosion. What on earth was this? A few seconds later it came again, this time more to the left. I felt the draught of the fast projectile almost at the time it exploded a little further off amid the trees. What the hell has come up now, just as I was going to get a little rest? I did not reach the safety of the second trench when another two grenades came over so close that I felt a spasm of fear going through me, making me feel defenceless to the point of extinction.

I do not remember how long I stayed pressed to the soft mossy ground with my face buried in the damp earth. When I finally came to my senses, I felt a warm sensation between my legs. For a second I thought I had been hit but then the shameful truth dawned on me: I had shit into my pants like a baby! Hot, angry tears welled up in my eyes till I told myself that nothing mattered in this stupid idiocy of a war, nothing but staying alive! And suddenly, all fear was gone, amid the rain of shrapnel falling through the leaves; I cleaned myself as best I could and then crawled to the safety of the second trench.

The deep satisfaction of a slice of bread and a warm drink filled my veins with blood again and when another round of these strange new and fast shells started whizzing around us, I knew it was time to change from the hunted to the hunter. I felt a strange calmness comes over me and all my senses were sharpened making me recognize my surroundings as if in broad daylight.

Another attack was being launched down there. But where was our fire? Why wasn't there any response from your guns? Get out of here and fight, I told myself. Fight, it's your only chance. I got back to the observation post just as another whoosh passed by over my head. But with the next shot I could detect the muzzle's glow. It had to be one of the anti-armour guns the enemy had brought in. That's why the bullets came with such speed and exploded only when hitting a hard object. I took my bearing and was just about to give order for the first round of fire when the anti-armour gun stopped firing.

The corporal told me that it changed position after a round of six shots and that it must be moving on the ridge opposite ours which gave it a pretty direct line of fire. The corporal was rather shaky too, but took over communication with the battery leaving me to direct the fire.

The barrage from machine guns and mortars was going on but the infantry attack seemed to be slowly subsiding judging from what we heard. That was the time to send a volley behind the attackers' line. It must have been bad hit as far as I could see through my field glasses, and rather close to the stretcher-bearers and ambulances. Sorry guys, I mumbled, that wasn't my intention.

"Hawk to duck. We are under fire from an AA-gun. Relief first platoon for separate targets. Over." — "What are you talking about? Are you hit?" — "No, just swallowing mud every time that gun starts firing at us. Pretty nasty situation. Would like second gun to zero in on this fast moving target. Over."

"In order. Tell us what you want! Over." - I was surprised at my calm after the fear and total breakdown of only some minutes ago. I was ready for a duel with this deadly weapon over there, and I was going to win it. I decided to use the gun no.1 against the mobile "Stalin Organ" and gun no.2, having the best-trained crew, against my new opponent. The remainder of the second platoon would be used to ward off attacking infantry. What a mess using a battery of howitzers on three different targets simultaneously, and to hell with my artillery training!

It was just after midnight when the next assault started, and this time it was the AA-gun that opened fire. I didn't have much time to locate its position while its shots crushed into the nearby trees and therefore our first grenade went far off target. There seemed to be a road or track behind the enemy infantry lines, which allowed it to move rather fast. I was so much involved in my observations and calculations against this opponent Number One that I forgot to order any shots on the other enemy weapons.

The corporal had crept into a corner of our trench and had lost all interest other than saving his skin. He would be the first one to run if there was any chance. A strange tiredness had settled on me, though my senses were registering all that happened my mind was constantly wandering to scenes and situations far away from the present.

"Duck, load second barrel and wait for command, over." — "Are you telling us to load and Wait where to fire? Are you sleeping up there and can we have a nap too?" — "Do as instructed, distance 3400, angle as before but fire on command only. Ready to change angles and fire. Over."

"Understood. Seems you are chasing ducks up there, ugh?" answered Virag. "It isn't a duck but a fast stinger aiming straight at us. Now, angle 325 and fire! Fire!" - This time, our shot was almost on target as I could see from the muzzle glow when the AA-gun let go its third salvo.

"Distance 3450, angle 330. Fire immediately!" - Now, where the hell is our next shot? Come on; get going, please fast! Whoosh, whoosh! More explosions all around us sent us flat on the ground as shrapnel bits whistled through the leaves and rained down on us. Something hit the ground right in front of the trench sending the camouflage flying in all directions. The noise was terrific and the smell of explosion filled our nostrils. The impact was so vehement, that neither I was momentarily deaf nor able to rise and look where our shot had gone down. It was the start of a fierce attack from all enemy muzzles, with flares and tracers lighting the scene. Clearly, they had gathered all their strength for a final attack.

As soon as I had regained my senses I ordered all our guns to fire one salvo after the other. For a few moments, it looked as if the enemy was getting through, but then the lines broke again. We watched as the tiny figures started running back up the hill, zigzagging to escape the deadly rain of shells, grenades and mortars, falling and getting up, or falling and lying there, twitching. What a terrible waste!

The corporal handed me the field telephone receiver and I heard Virag's voice: "Do you want us to spend all ammunition? Sound like hells got lose up there. We can hardly hear your commands. All of you all right? Over."

"Virag, listen and do exactly as I tell you now. Keep the second gun loaded and ready to fire on command. Reload as soon as you've fired. Over!"

"Sir, Zvonko, you know this is against the rules. It's extremely dangerous for all of us here."

"I don't care a damn about that right now. We've got to get that bastard of AA-gun!"

"Sorry, sir. Will do as ordered. Report second gun loaded and ready to fire."

All was quiet again; one would have forgotten there was a battle except for the acrid smell of gun powder that filled the mist coming up from the valley. It was still pitch dark but I felt it must be close to dawn; it seemed as if we had been up there for hours on end. How long would it all last, I wondered, and who would give in first? The corporal was counting the bits of shrapnel he had put into his pocket, one for each attack. They were more than a dozen he told me, when I was electrified by yet another muzzle glow below.

"Second gun 3500, angle 290! Fire!" - I heard our shot fly over just before the AA-gun sent off its second round. It had moved to the left and I was wondering whether our machine guns were their target now. Our shot was not far out, so I ordered the next one: "3550, angle 285. Fire!"

Our grenade was on its way just as the AA-gun had fired the fourth time, and this time straight at us, as I heard from the whoosh coming at us. I didn't get down for cover, I was too anxious seeing where our shot had gone. A fifth shot was fired just an instant before our grenade exploded sending up dirt and smoke, a good sign for a full hit.

Same distance, angle 280. Fire!" - I was obsessed with the thought of getting this enemy, as I did not notice that the sixth shot did not come. I turned all my attention on the other mobile target and now ordered the first gun to get it. Another infantry wave was launched on the opposite side but it was over before it came halfway down the slope.

The corporal told me that there had only been five shots from the AA-gun and I wondered whether we had really hit it. We wouldn't know before the next attack was started. It was becoming lighter. I recognized the outlines of the horizon in the dim light of dawn. The sky was cloudy and light fog was hanging in the air. Would the Reds continue their attack in full daylight? I felt certain exhilaration about the way we had fought off the AA-gun.

I called Virag telling him about our possible hit and asked if we could have some food or would we be replaced? As we were talking, the fighting started again but there was no heavy fire this time. Where was the AA-gun? Where was Stalin's prick?

"Duck to hawk. Where are your orders? Don't forget the second gun is loaded."

"Seems like only a minor attempt, this time. No AA-gun fire so far. Is any replacement with food underway?"

"Understand. We're hanging on. Sorry, no replacements for the moment but will send food. Over!"

Time dragged on. We were dozing, waking only when another skirmish down below startled us by its noise. But the assaults were less and less serious as the attempts to make it down to the river more and more scattered. We had no contact with any unit on our side, even the Germans didn't turn up anymore. We sat there in the damp, narrow trench, wondering what life had in store for us. No shots had been directed at our post for the past three or four hours, where were the heavy guns of the Reds, where did the AA-gun hide? Or had we really silenced it?

Then full daylight came, but it was a dull morning, misty and cloudy. In spite of it, the birds started to sing a most unrealistic sound in this scenery of battle and death. It was time to get out of this pit and stretch one's limbs after the cramped discomfort of the night. I crept out cautiously and made my way into the forest. The ground was scattered with broken branches and twigs and many trunks showed holes where shells had gone through.

I was looking for a place to relieve myself and took off my heavy coat. To my surprise, the back was almost in shreds. When I shook it, bits of shrapnel fell out and others still stuck to the material. I undressed down to my shirt, hoping nobody would come, and cleansed myself with the wet grass and larger leaves I found. What a way to do one's toilette, how very demeaning this business of war was! I dressed again, picked up my coat and arms and other paraphernalia and walked back to our bunker.

When I returned to the observation post, all was quiet except for the occasional rifle shot. Phone rang again and message came in: "Duck to hawk. Is the hunt still on? You have one gun still loaded here."

"It looks as if our prey is getting tired. What's up? Is there any news? Where is the captain?"

"No news! Situation here same as when you left us yesterday. Am sending you something to cheer you up. What's about the Second?"

I answered: "Discharge the Second! Seems like nothing much is going on at the moment. Set it on 6400, angle 400, sixth charge or whatever you've got. Over."

The grenade passed over our heads with its well-known whistle and a cloud of smoke came up against the horizon, slightly out of sight. I left the corporal to guard the observation post, sent the telecom-man to check the lines and went walking into the woods to meet the orderly, who would be bringing some food for us. As I cautiously stalked through the wet undergrowth I hoped that I would meet somebody from another units positioned in front of us and to get some news about last night's battle. The corporal's method of counting the attacks had proved to be a bit inaccurate due to his fear at the height of fighting, but according to his count we had fought off more than twenty attempts.

I turned right and shortly afterwards came to the edge of the forest running down to the valley below. There was away in front the church tower of Velika Barna as before, so were the last houses of the village outside the forest. I went back into the woods, no sign of any infantry post or entrenchment. At our own bunker, my orderly was waiting with some hot brew and bread. As far as he knew, our commander hadn't come to Mali Grdjevac and it seemed that I am to be the only officer in charge up here. He had seen some German units retreating towards Veliki Grdjevac just before sunrise. That was all.

Back at our post, I found that the front had gone dead. We couldn't see any movement anywhere. I went to check on our left, from where the German officer had come last night. Not finding anything there I decided to go back and see whether the phone-man had returned with any news. This perfect quietness all around us was becoming more frightening than the battle noise. It was almost midday, when the corporal discovered that our field telephone was dead. Not feeling like being left behind I decided that we would get out of here before it was too late.

We were just packing up when my orderly came rushing towards us in great haste shouting: "Get out, sir, please run! Run away quickly! We're left behind. Everybody has left the front here."

"Where is the phone-man? Why is the line cut off?"

"Please forget him and get out quickly. The horses are waiting in the orchard down there. I had to leave them unattended, hope somebody won't pinch them before we get there. I better run back."

And gone he was like a genie. The corporal, having heard the frightening news, picked up the telephone box and started running after the orderly like a man possessed. I had no wish to play the hero, so I, too, took the most obvious thing, namely the telemetry glass, and shouldering it started running after the men. Nobody, who hasn't himself had the experience, will ever know what it means to run through a dense forest in full army outfit and heavy riding boots, carrying telescopic field glasses on top of it all.

When you are running for your life you tend to forget these physical discomforts. All you can think of is that you don't want to get caught by those you had been trying to shoot down all night. I do not remember how long it took us to get to the edge of the forest and find our horses. By some miracle, they were there waiting for us. It took some time to dismantle the telemetry glass and fasten it to my saddle, and only when it was done, did I notice that I had left my coat up at the observation post.

There was no time to lose as my orderly was already galloping down the orchard. The corporal waited till I had mounted Kestenko and off all we were too. First, only in a trot as we simply couldn't believe that we should have been left behind just like that. But when we found that on the road there was no traffic and no signs of any infantry or our battery, we broke into a gallop leaving the deserted village of Mali Grdjevac behind us.

It seemed as if we were flying on our horses, with the corporal just ahead of me, and soon we could see my orderly reaching one of the battery's carts or carriers at convoy's end. No shot had been fired at us so far, and with a little luck, we too, would reach the relative safety of the convoy.



At left the badge of a Hrvatski Domobran soldier's cap and the standard button on most of the Croatian army's uniforms as from 1941 at right.

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