

09. CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH JAKS

Friday, May 4, 1945

It was a fairly warm morning, with the sun coming up the other side of the village of Cirkvena after the second quiet night we spent there. I had slept in a bed again, a great luxury after two weeks of sleeping wherever possible. The few peasants who had remained in Cirkvena had received us well and were looking after our horses and us in a most friendly way. Out of the shrewd thought, most probably, that it pays to keep soldiers happy.

We had come to Cirkvena on the 2nd of May, after the colonel had given explicit orders for the battery to return to the front. I had witnessed a very heated conversation between Colonel Stier and our captain who had tried hard to impress the colonel with his knowledge and training experience in the use and purpose of a heavy artillery unit. It hadn't helped at all, but what I got out of this dispute was the information that the Second Ustaski Zdrug, to which our battery belonged, was supposed to defend the northern flank against the enemy in his attempt at encircling Zagreb.

We were well over 40 kilometres from the Drava River at north, about the same distance a crow would fly to Zagreb. The colonel and the captain were talking of a concentration of armed forces along a new defence line when I left them to get the horse teams ready to pull out of the orchard in Zabno. I wished I could have stayed on for more news with respect to our prospects. Now, back in Cirkvena, the captain had found a nice, comfortable house for himself but the rest of the battery had to find accommodations in barns and stables. The guns' encampment was quickly made in the soft soil as well as easy making of the camouflage with the orchards' rich green. The guns were placed so that we could withdraw quickly if need be, with the horse teams quartered in the nearby stables.

The main problem was the possibility of close combat and the use of shrapnel grenades, which would have caused tremendous damage in our congested quarters. The supplies had stayed with the rest of convoy in Zabno together with the main body of Gregl's men, who were now under the colonel's direct command. We had a few machine-guns with us, mainly for use against aerial attacks. Vlatko was with the Division commander as a liaison officer, a rather strange decision but understandable as he was wearing the full uniform of an Ustasa officer. Our captain must have lost face with the colonel having to remain with us for the first time in the past three weeks, as far as I could remember.

Our observation post was again set up in the church tower from where one had an excellent view over the plain towards the east and the river Velika Rijeka. There was one main road typical for all such villages: an earth beaten track about 8 meters wide and with wide ditches on both sides next to brick tiled walks in front of the houses, wherever the owner's wealth allowed such luxury. In front of some of the houses were large chestnut or walnut trees. It was pleasant to walk or sit in the shade of these trees and their green foliage. The road, leading to nowhere in particular, disappeared towards the horizon behind the last houses of the village's eastern boundary. I never went that far as I preferred to be as close as possible to our horse teams and to Virag's cart to which Kestenko was being hitched whenever we were on the move.

All went according to routine this third morning after our arrival. The night had been quiet except for some rifle fire by nervous sentinels up and down the front which ran along the river Cazma and its tributary, the Velika Rijeka, coming from the southern ridge of the Bilogora Hills. Occasional flares lit up the night with their ghostly light, and once I saw some infantry units moving down the village road but I had no idea where their command post was. As before, there was a serious lack of connection with the infantry units out in front so that one had to rely on one's own judgement as to where to direct the guns. We changed watch every few hours with two corporals from the captain's command post to which we were linked with a field telephone. Having discovered a short cut through some gardens I was able to get to the church within a few minutes.

After a hearty breakfast I set out on foot thinking it foolish to mount Kestenko for such a short distance, especially as Virag had told me that one of our draught horses had a sore foot and that he might have to use Kestenko in its place. I didn't mind at all feeling much safer within the crowd of gunners, anyway. But was it really safer?

On the main road infantry units marching in both directions were often the Domobrans but there were no Germans at all. We still had no contact with any of the other command posts even with Vlatko back in Zabno. I was worried about this, wondering what was going on and where was the front supposed to run? One could not see anything like it from the church tower, no trenches or encampments to be seen anywhere in the light of the morning sun.

And so the morning passed without any dramatic incident. There was sporadic rifle fire or an occasional machine-guns one. Once, I saw some enemy soldiers running over some fields in the distance but no rifle fire or mortar grenade sending up clouds of dust. As far as my inexperienced eyes could judge, there was no artillery out at the front of us and I told this to the corporal who came to take over at lunchtime. The captain had invited me to a meal specially prepared for him by our cooks. I thoroughly enjoyed this feat, before I reluctantly went back a few hours later on duty again up at the observation post. As usual, I took my shortcut through the gardens, a serious mistake as it turned out later on as I missed my corporal as well as a mounted messenger who came galloping down the main road from Zabno.

I arrived at the main square and found it deserted. No soldier anywhere in sight, as far as I could see. Strange, I thought, as I climbed up the steep steps of the church tower. On watch I found a young corporal I did not know very well and who was very anxious to get down and to his lunch. When he had gone I took out my field glasses and started to survey the surroundings. Not a sound to be heard and no infantry in any of the places I had spotted them this morning.

I had a sudden inner feeling of foreboding, grabbed the telephone box that went dead, and started down the steps of the tower. I was in such a hurry to get down that I never stopped. Not even at any of the small openings in the walls of the tower to see what was going on below. In less than a minute I was out in the square. As before, it was absolutely empty, I ran along the walls not to expose myself to any possible sniper but I had to cross the main road in order to get to my shortcut through the gardens. What on earth was happening down there in the gun encampments? How fast we would be able to get them out of Cirkvena, I was wondering while I ran along the wall parallel with the road. I stopped and cautiously raised my head above the wall to see down the road. Was there some movement at the far end of the village?

I had to make sure before attempting to cross the road. I aimed my field glasses to the spot and saw some figures moving up the road very, very slowly. With a sinking heart, I noticed the typical three-cornered hat worn by the partisans and the red star right in front. Jesus, God! There was the enemy at the far end of Cirkvena and nobody had warned us. I crept along the wall until I reached its end and made my way through the gate. Crossing the ditch was simple because it gave enough cover but how would I cross the main road without attracting the enemy's attention?

I took a deep breath and mustering all my courage sprinted over the road and into the opposite ditch. Nothing happened! No shot was fired! No shout was heard! Crouching in the ditch I eased myself behind a tree trunk to stop and look what was happening about 500 meters further down the road. A few enemy soldiers had stopped in front of the last houses of the village, obviously trying to find out where our men were posted. You won't have to wait long, I thought, as I managed to cover the short open space of the walkway and started running through the gardens towards the gun encampment.

As I was getting closer to the battery's place I heard some noise and noticed a great commotion and turmoil. The ammo-carriers were on the way out and the other carts must have left some minutes before because I could not see Virag's cart. As I approached the first gun, I saw that it was being pulled out and the riders were waiting for the gunners to climb aboard up in front. As I stopped to catch my breath, I saw the second gun being pulled out - everything was going on so fast. I felt nailed to the ground for a moment. Then I heard somebody calling my name, and shouting and cursing in turn, I started running towards the third gun. I had just time to throw the telephone box onto the carrier when this gun was moving.

There was nobody in proper command nor was it needed as the howitzers moved out of the orchard and onto the road. No time to look for transport, I thought, and catching hold of the seat behind the shield I swung myself up onto the gun. Holding fast with one hand on the handle and with the other gripping the gun barrel I had the terrible feeling of being on a ride to hell.

As we bounced down the road leading towards the main road from Bjelovar to Zabno, I stood up and looked where we were going. Over the gun shield I could see the other two howitzers galloping along in a cloud of dust which made it impossible to see anything further on in front of them. I heard some firing but was not able to discern from which direction it came. And was this the noise of an airplane? I must have acquired a special sense for this particular noise to hear it over the enormous din all around me, but there was the hum of an approaching plane coming from the direction of Zabno. We hadn't seen it due to the sun, but there it was coming directly at us from the left.

I started to shout, waving one hand for attention while holding onto the gun with the other. The gun leader heard me and understood my order: "Get off the road! Into the field! Turn left into the field! Turn left! Turn left!"

I pulled out my pistol and fired a shot into the air for attention, but the front rider had heard me and was already leading the front pair into the field on the left, followed by the other two. For some reason the horses started to run and we were galloping over the field in frenzy. If anybody had fallen, from a carrier or a horse, there would have been little chance

of survival. I realized that I was shouting on top of my voice as the plane was coming straight towards us. It was a Russian JAK, just as I had expected.



A formation of the Russian JAKs attacking bombers.

I saw that the other gun crews had followed our example and that by now all four teams were spreading out like a fan in various directions, the only chance to avoid the attack from the JAK that was now starting to dive. I was ducking behind the shield expecting to be hit by a bullet any moment, frantically holding on as we careened over the uneven ground.

The plane was now so close that I could see the shadow of the pilot's head in the turret, and I could almost see the bomb detaching itself from the plane. But nothing! I didn't hear any bullets' hissing or any bomb exploding around us. What was the matter? In a minute the JAK was behind us. But the pilot had something on his mind because he turned and came back at us just as we were slowing down on account of a slight rise as we neared Zabno.

We made a turn to the right to get back onto the main road, and soon I spotted the JAK again coming out of the sun. Some of the gunners jumped off and started running for cover in the field but I was still hanging on, crouching behind the shield, as my gun was still moving fairly fast. Again, the plane made a dive at us - but still no fire, no explosion. Suddenly, I realized that the plane was waving its wings at us. Good God, he was sending us greetings! Whether the pilot actually raised his hand in salute or whether I just imagined it, I cannot say, all I remember is that he had scared us to death and that we heaved a sigh of relief as he disappeared into the sky.

Back on the main road, we had to wait for a while till all guns and crews were back together, before starting the steepest part of the road. The horses were covered with foam and sweat, trembling from exhaustion just like the men whose hair and faces were caked with dust. When the first carts of our convoy joined up with us, I heard the captain's voice: "This was quite a spectacle you provided us with, lieutenant. Is everything alright with you?"

Somewhat shamefaced I replied: "Yes sir, thank you, all guns and crews in good shape. But the horses could do with a rest."

"Very well, close in behind us as soon as you're ready. Don't stand around and wait for another JAK. The next one might have some ammunition on board."

So that was it! The plane had been on its return to home base after a bombing mission and therefore had not carried any ammunition, probably also was short on petrol. But how was one to know such good luck? I felt sorry for our horses but knew that we had to keep on marching, wherever we were marching to. Soon Virag came with his cart and I decided to ride on my "command cart" for a while, especially as I saw that Kestenko was pulling it.

"Virag, what happened at Cirkvena? Why didn't anybody warn me of the approaching enemy?"

"But, sir, we got the order to move out just after you had left to go back to the observation post. Surely you must have met the messenger on the way?"

Well, I had not as I was taking the shortcut through the gardens, and that dumb corporal on duty had probably misunderstood the telephone message as simply calling him back for lunch. Whatever it was, here I was back with my platoons and in full retreat. After passing through Zabno we turned right towards Krizevci, not left on the road to Zagreb, as we had all hoped. Where was the fate leading us into the Unknown?

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